

Catherine Linden

Highland Flame

[image]

Restraining himself, Alex kissed her deeply, yet tenderly, then pressed his mouth lightly to each spot on her face where Stafford had bruised it, then to her eyes, her ears, the corners of her mouth, and her throat where he could feel a pulse beating in agitation. He raised his head and smiled at her in the darkness. "You like me a little?"

"Aye, of course, but"

"I can bring you joy, ecstasy, feelings that you've never known before. 'Tis pleasure I want to give you, Marina," he went on in a deep, hypnotic voice, "not pain. Such sweet pleasure . . ."

*For Ian Irvine, Laurence McNamara,
and Kevin Robertshaw, with love.*

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YOUTHFUL FOLLY

*Life is but a journey
To travel how you will.
There are some who strive
Who can only thrive
By climbing to the hill,
Who will walk the sword
Or face the horde
With boldness in their blood.*

*There are those who will
And those who won't
Grasp life in eager hands.
Some fear to love
As they fear to live,
And the food they eat is dust.
Their souls may thirst
But never will they drink.*

1

*Northumberland,
England, 1586*

At seven o'clock in the evening a small wedding party gathered expectantly in the hall of Chiltern Castle. On the gallery above, the sixteen-year-old bride, virginal in a flowing white gown and with flowers entwined in her pale gold hair, lingered with her attendants ready to make their entrance once the groom and his retinue arrived.

The bride, Marina, was pale and rather sober, but the rest of the assembly were merry and excited, except for Father Ridley who only moments before had emerged from his secret apartment behind the massive chimney to conduct the marriage ceremony a Catholic ceremony forbidden by English law.

Only the priest was uneasy . . . at first.

Sir Guy Percy, master of Chiltern Castle, stood with his back to the fire and surveyed the scene around him. Aye, he thought, it would do well enough,

considering the haste with which everything had had to be arranged. Though frost rimed the desolate countryside surrounding his castle and there was a frigid nip in the air, the hall fire sent out a cheery blaze of warmth and the rather gloomy, dark-paneled chamber was brightened with candlelight and decorated with greenery and autumnal flowers, the air freshened with sweet-scented herbs and pine boughs.

With a glance at his priest, he thought, Would that this marriage were over with! Percy, a stout, broad-faced knight in his early fifties, was normally good-natured and hearty, but his smile was somewhat strained that evening and his manner impatient.

Feeling the bride's eyes upon him, Sir Guy glanced up to the minstrels' gallery and saw that her face was white in the dark above-stairs and the expression on her lovely face was tense and unsmiling. He knew well that his ward, Marina Dudley, had no great desire to marry young Nevil Dacre, but the silly whims of adolescent girls made little impression on a man of his station. As for the wedding itself, well . . . it was not *his* fault that it had had to be brought forward by several months and, consequently, would not now be the grand occasion they had first planned. " 'Tis your own doing, you careless burde," he told her silently when their eyes met. "Mayhap now you will keep a closer check on your tongue."

Percy and his plump wife, Lady Maud, were very keen to see the girl wed and off their hands. They had raised six children of their own, and theirs had not been an easy marriage, though in later years they had reached a comfortable relationship with each other and naturally wished nothing to disturb that. It therefore had been annoying to both that their ward was rapidly turning into a dark-eyed coquette with an innocently provocative manner that had begun to

attract the attention of every worthy in the district. Strictly raised as Marina had been, *they* knew that the girl was pure and chaste, but she had a flirtatious way about her that was beginning to worry them.

"She is a ripening peach soon to be plucked if we are not vigilant," Lady Maud had fretted recently, adding darkly, "Then there is that unfortunate business at the Harvest Ball to consider. Nay, nay," she

had said, shaking her head, "the thing to do is to bring forward her wedding to Dacre's son posthaste. That girl could make much trouble for herself and us."

The "unfortunate business" that his wife had referred to had happened a few weeks ago during the annual harvest festivities. One of their guests that evening had been a man traveling from Scotland to London, a Spaniard called Sedina and an avid Catholic. He made no secret of the fact that he dreamed, along with the King of Spain, of toppling Queen Elizabeth of England off her throne and installing Queen Mary of Scotland there in her stead. Sedina, an emissary of his Spanish sovereign, had been sent to Scotland to treat with the young King and from there had slipped over the border into England with the express purpose of making as much trouble as possible.

Marina had been allowed to attend the ball that evening and had been seated next to the Spaniard at the feast that preceded it. Much wine had flowed, and the girl, unused to it, had become flushed and giddy. Sedina, like many another of late, had been captivated by the young beauty and her pert ways. He had also been intrigued by her name, Dudley.

He asked Marina brashly, not caring who overheard, "Can you be related to Queen Elizabeth's lover, Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester?"

She was startled, then laughed and shook her head.

"Oh, come," chuckled Sedina when she blushed, "all know how it is with them. Surely we can speak plain out here in the wilds of the North? There is scant support for the Protestant Queen here."

The North of England was predominantly Catholic and generally opposed to the present regime, but even in remote Northumberland one had to be very careful as Elizabeth had her spies everywhere. But Marina was very young and knew little about the political situation in the country. This was her first ball, and her whole intent was to seem as sophisticated as possible.

The Spaniard took his gaze from her and glanced around the candlelit hall, inquiring casually, "Where are your parents, fair Marina? Are they here among us tonight?"

"Nay," she sighed, "they are dead, I fear. Sir Guy Percy is my guardian."

"Indeed." Again the black eyes returned to her face, and this time Sedina examined her speculatively, all the while stroking his pointed beard. He had been merely jesting at first. Now he wondered if it were possible. He noted Marina's golden-blond hair, a few shades lighter than the Queen's, and her velvety dark eyes melting, seductive eyes of the type Queen Elizabeth was said to find so irresistible in Robert Dudley, the man who had rarely left her side since she first became queen. As he studied Marina, intrigued, several exciting ideas presented themselves to him. And how convenient, he thought, that her parents happened to be dead.

He leaned close to her and suggested slyly, "Could it be that you are one of their bastards, eh? Rumor has it that they have had several, all shunted quickly out of the way."

Marina was shocked that he would dare suggest

such a thing. The Queen and Robert Dudley! Why, the Spaniard was not only insolent, but dangerously bold as well. She had never known her parents, it was true they had died when she was only a toddler but she *did* know who they were, and she was certainly not a bastard! For a second, as she gazed at Sedina wide-eyed, a hazy, jumbled impression wafted into her mind from the distant past, one that, while unclear, touched her with sadness and a feeling of loss. But Marina didn't want to be sad tonight! This was her first ball and she intended to enjoy herself and make merry with everyone else.

Shrugging the feeling off, she laughed and joked, "Yea, 'tis obvious that I am one of theirs. As you can see, sir" with a wave down at her rather modest blue muslin gown "I am clad in cloth of gold and wear a tiara on my head, and these beads about my neck are really diamonds"

"Marina, be silent!" thundered a man seated directly across the table. He was Clive Radcliffe, a cousin of Sir Guy's, and he had heard the entire conversation between the pair. Now, glowering at the crafty Spaniard, he warned Marina, "Guard your tongue, you foolish burde. These walls about us have ears."

When this was reported to Sir Guy immediately following the function, he felt a jolt of the greatest alarm. Fuming, he barged down the dark corridor to his ward's chamber, threw open the door, and proceeded to thrash her soundly for being so dangerously indiscreet. "See what mischief you've wrought!" Percy roared into her startled face. "That Spaniard is doubtless a spy for his King and will seize

whatever means he can to try to discredit Queen Elizabeth." Shaking her, he informed her, "Do you not know, you witless twit, that Elizabeth prides herself on being a virgin? She would like her people to believe that all

her love and devotion is reserved for them. This is a difficult time for the Queen with her ministers hounding her to execute her prisoner, Queen Mary of Scotland. Should she go through with it, Elizabeth's own conduct must be above reproach. And and for you to make such a scandalous claim at this time!"

"I didn't know . . ." Marina whimpered, trying to protect herself from the angry blows raining down about her head. "I spoke in jest and meant no harm, I swear it!" At the same time she was puzzled, wondering why her guardian was so furious with her. "I thought we did not care overmuch for Protestants here and would band together with any country to bring down"

He struck her again, harder than before. "Christ's bones, girl, how you try my patience! Dost not realize that there are informers everywhere; that we can trust no one not even the servants in our own house?" Percy grabbed her by her long blonde hair and wrenched her white face close to his, growling, "You'd best pray tonight that nothing comes of your reckless tattle. Child though you are, you could *still* end up in the Tower of London and us with you!"

Marina lay shivering in terror after Sir Guy left her. Never before had he spoken to her so seriously about the political situation in the country. In fact, Percy rarely bothered to speak to her at all. A busy man with many grown children of his own and a large estate to administer, he had scant interest in his young ward. As for his wife, Lady Maud, *she* occupied herself in social activities and keeping up with the latest gossip and was not above stirring up a little intrigue of her own, pitting one branch of the family against the other for her own amusement. Fat, lazy, and completely self-centered, a woman with a strong avaricious streak, Maud Percy had troubled herself little about

her own children, let alone Marina Dudley.

Growing up in Chiltern Castle, Marina had been cared for well enough and, befitting a young lady of her station, had received a classical education, but the Percys had never shown her any love or attention at all. By and large they ignored her, except when she spoke or acted

out of turn, as she had that night.

Soon, she mused, she would have someone of her own to take an interest in her. That someone was eighteen-year-old Nevil Dacre, a lad she had been betrothed to since childhood, but the thought of marriage with the vague, introverted Nevil brought Marina no joy, though she knew that joy had very little to do with making an advantageous marriage. Marriage was a serious business, too serious to be left to the immature desires of young people. At least Dacre was young, and even pleasant to look upon. Surely, Marina tried to convince herself, that was something to be grateful for. She thought of poor Helen Percy Sir Guy and Lady Maud's youngest daughter who the previous year had been wed to a wealthy, and ugly, nobleman four times her age.

"Aye," she sighed, "it could be worse; far worse."

Oh, why had she allowed that knave Sedina to draw her into making that disastrous claim? It had only been meant as a joke, but

Marina prayed fervently that night that there had been no informers at the harvest ball; that the Spaniard himself would not mention it when he moved on to London.

She wasn't the only one who prayed. For weeks after the ball Sir Guy lived in fear, well aware that they were living in particularly dangerous times. Though far away in the North of England, the Catholics of the area were kept informed of the situation in London by their own network of spies. Much of the intrigue as

it had for years centered around the figurehead of Mary Stuart, the deposed Queen of Scotland. Mary had now been incarcerated in English prisons for eighteen long years. Countless plots had sprung up to free her, schemes hatched both at home and abroad; the Pope himself was said to be actively behind many of them. The goal of them all was to knock Queen Elizabeth, thought of as a bastard by the Catholics, off her throne and place her cousin Mary there in her place. By so doing they would restore the true religion to England.

Amazingly, every rescue attempt had failed, but even so, new plots kept arising, every one of them posing a serious threat to the present monarch. Now, increasingly pressed by her ministers who were impatient to have the matter done with once and for all, they had heard that Queen Elizabeth was ready to sign her cousin's death warrant, something she had avoided doing for years.

The eyes of every Catholic both at home and abroad were turned grimly on London, causing Elizabeth to shrink with apprehension. She was especially afraid of how mighty Spain might react if she executed Mary Stuart. Worse, even some of her own Protestant subjects, for various reasons, were now taking a more critical view of their Queen, their sympathy aroused by the dire plight of Mary. They remembered that Mary had flown to England as a young woman fully expecting to receive help from her own kin and had been locked up in prison instead. They recalled too how Elizabeth had tried to implicate Mary in the murder of Mary's husband, Lord Darnley, charging that she had been behind the plot to kill her weak reprobate of a consort so that she could be free to wed the Earl of Bothwell. This had never been proved.

Some were muttering, "Is Elizabeth herself so spot-

less? What of Amy Robsart, the former wife of Robert Dudley?" The woman had died under mysterious circumstances some years before, her death freeing Dudley to wed his royal lover. But the people of the country had howled against the idea, certain that Dudley had connived to bring about his wife's murder. Further, they firmly believed, the blood of others also stained his grasping hands. We will have no Dudley as consort, they made clear, and Elizabeth never thwarted the desires of her people though she still kept the Earl of Leicester close to her side.

Many the world over sympathized with Mary Stuart, watching and waiting to see what her cousin Queen Elizabeth would do. It was the most delicate moment of the English Queen's reign. Now, as never before, her deportment must be impeccable, her character above reproach.

Sir Guy Percy lay awake at night sweating with fear.

"Get Marina wed at once," his wife had advised, "while we still have heads upon our shoulders to see to the arrangements. And let the ceremony be a quiet one held at night, with few there to witness it."

Percy had gone to see Lord Dacre, the father of the prospective groom, asking that the wedding be hastened. " 'Tis because of my good wife," he lied. "She has been ailing of late and her condition seems to be worsening. It would be a great relief to her to see our ward safely wed."

"Then let it be done," Dacre had agreed. He had worries of his own,

chiefly that his vague son Nevil might slowly be losing his mind, and once that became obvious there would be no marriage with Marina Dudley and no dowry to fatten the Dacre coffers.

It had been arranged that the marriage should take place a week later.

Now the day had come, or rather, the evening. It was now well past seven o'clock and the small assembly gathered in Chiltern Castle were growing restive, none more so than Father Ridley.

"The groom and his party are unseemly late," the priest remarked, and bit his nails.

Percy, annoyed, strode to the window and peered out, his eyes scanning the countryside for a glimpse of the torches Dacre and his men would be carrying to light their way. He saw nothing but a vast, unrelieved darkness. Windswept hills and lonely valleys stretched between Chiltern and the Dacre fortress to the south and the Scottish border less than ten miles away to the north, some of the most desolate and potentially dangerous territory in all of England.

"What keeps them, think you?" fretted Ridley, hovering nervously at Percy's elbow. "They should have been here long since, and 'tis not like Dacre to be late for his own son's wedding." He admitted, "I like this not."

"Be silent, priest," Sir Guy muttered beneath his breath. "Would you alarm the others? Nay, nay, there's a good reason for his tardiness, rest assured. Mayhap some problem has arisen on his estate, or one of his party has become ill."

"There are many possibilities," Father Ridley replied dourly, thinking longingly of his secret apartment behind the chimney.

The candles guttered low and the blazing fire burned down to embers. Shadows crept out of the corners of the huge hall and moved insidiously in the direction of the small group now huddled in front of the fire, no longer gay and excited. They looked at each other uneasily, all locked in an eerie silence.

Turning from the window, Percy felt his flesh prickle when he saw a vision in white gliding down the long

curved staircase. In the preternatural aura that gripped everyone he

thought for a second that he was seeing a ghost, but it was only his ward, Marina Dudley. Pointing, Sir Guy angrily ordered her back to the gallery. "Get up yonder and wait, girl! 'Tis bad luck to come down before the groom gets here."

Lady Maud, wringing her hands, spoke for them all. "What if he doesn't come?"

The Scottish Highlanders rode in stealth through the twilit English countryside cloaked and hooded and heavily armed, a tight little band of twelve determined men all bent on a single goal to rescue Queen Mary of Scotland as she was being moved from one prison to another.

Lord Alexander Sinclair, the leader of the group, had decided that this was the most vulnerable moment to attack, perhaps the last such moment before Mary Stuart vanished into the grim fortress of Fotheringay Castle, a stronghold said to be impregnable. The conspirators were all young men from noble Scottish families, and each had embarked on the mission of his own free will, unanimously electing Alexander Sinclair to be their leader. Like them all, he was young, on the brink of his twenty-first birthday. Tall and dark but with brilliant green eyes that stood out vividly in the warm olive tones of his skin, he was a natural leader. Already he had proved that he was daring and courageous, and he came from a family with a tradition of serving the Crown as his father had done before him at the time when Queen Mary had reigned as a beautiful young woman in Scotland. It had been his sire, the Earl of Belrose, who had tried valiantly to steer Mary Stuart safely through the traps and pitfalls awaiting her when she returned from France to rule her native Scotland, but in the end the

Queen's emotional, headstrong ways had prevailed. When her nobles turned against her and she fled in search of help to regain her crown, the Earl of Belrose had urged her to go to France but Mary turned to her English cousin Elizabeth instead, certain that she would assist her.

It had proved to be a fatal mistake.

Now, with the fiery confidence of youth upon him, Alex had eagerly picked up the gauntlet his father had cast down. That, he felt strongly, was his destiny.

Far away from the Scottish border, Sinclair and his men rode through the dusk settling over the English countryside. Three leagues from Fotheringay Castle they slowed and entered a small wood where they

melded with the trees. There they waited, listening for the sound of hoofbeats approaching through the twilight. It was the most exciting and dangerous moment of their lives.

"What if our spies were wrong?" muttered Rab Hamilton, moving his horse closer to Sinclair's. "They might take the Queen to a different fortress."

"Nay" Alex shook his dark head "our contacts at Chartley Hall can be trusted. Fotheringay is definitely the place." He peered through the trees at the field beyond. "Many feel this will be her last prison. Elizabeth and her ministers are determined to have her head this time."

"And we are just as determined that they won't!" replied Hamilton with a touch of bravado. He looked at Alex hopefully. "Let us drink to the success of our venture."

Sinclair nodded. A little brandy would do them all good. He knew that his men were anxious and they had every reason to be. If this failed and they were captured they would certainly feel the kiss of the executioner's axe. Like his friends, he was remember-

ing another rescue attempt that had recently failed, the infamous Babington Plot. The young instigator, Anthony Babington, and the others involved in the conspiracy had suffered a fiendish traitor's death on St. Giles's Field, an end so barbaric that even the spectators, though Elizabeth's loyal subjects, had been revolted at the sight, many reduced to tears.

Sinclair, like his friends, tried hard not to think about that now, and when each in turn drank from a silver flask of brandy they vowed, "Freedom or death!"

They were prepared for whatever might come, and if failure it would bewitch none of them believed for a moment they would not allow themselves to be taken alive to suffer the ignominious fate of Babington. Each had another small flask tucked away inside his jerkin pocket, a lethal dose of poison.

In the dusk Alexander looked at his friends and fellow conspirators and silently applauded each and every one of them. They were the flower and flame of Scotland, the cream of the young generation. Most were Highlanders like himself, vigorous lads who in the normal course of events would have had every reason to expect to enjoy a long,

happy life had it not been for the dream they all shared. But, he thought, a man must stand by his convictions. Queen Mary was older now, her beauty and sparkle grown dim from her long years in prison; they had heard that she was frequently ill and almost crippled with arthritis. All she had to look forward to if she were not rescued was the sharp blade of an axe.

Her predicament stirred great compassion in Alex and his friends and brought out all their chivalrous instincts. They would free this royal lady, they swore, or die in the attempt.

"Listen!" whispered nineteen-year-old Jamie Fra-

ser, and began to sweat profusely in spite of the chilly night air. "They come now . . ."

They all heard it then, the dull pounding of many riders coming toward them across the plain. Alex and his friends reached for their weapons. Success, he felt, would lie in the element of surprise.

2

The steward at Chiltern Castle was the first to spot the torches flaring in the darkness, and cried, "My Lord Dacre and his party are coming at last!"

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief prematurely, as it turned out, because it was not Dacre and his company who rode into the courtyard but twenty strangers, agents of Sir Francis Walsingham, the man in charge of Queen Elizabeth's secret police.

To the horror and consternation of the bridal party, these men burst into the castle shouting that everyone present was under arrest. In the chaos that followed, Father Ridley vanished like a puff of smoke into his priest's hole behind the chimney and Lady Maud Percy swooned and collapsed on the floor. But Sir Guy, fighting back his terror, stepped up to the leader and blustered, "What means this intrusion? We are gathered here for a wedding. Surely that is no reason to place us under arrest?"

Norman Bellamy, the chief agent, smiled cynically. He knew that the North of England had long been a hotbed of dissent. "We have reason to believe, sir, that there's more than a wedding going on under your

roof."

He turned away to order his men to block the doors and herd everyone, including the servants, into the hall. Then he looked hard at Percy. "I understand that you have a woman living here who has spread an evil lie connecting herself to the Queen. Kindly point this lady out at once."

Sir Guy went very pale, but still tried to brazen it out. "What nonsense! We have no such woman here."

"Sir Percy" Bellamy fixed him with a cold eye "take care how you answer. The information we have came from a reliable source or we would not have come all this way. 'Twould be better for you to speak the truth now, I assure you, than to be taken back to the Tower and have it forced out of you on the rack. Speak, man!" he suddenly thundered. "Identify the woman who made this treasonable claim."

The knight's eyes flickered to where Marina stood gripping the balustrade at the bottom of the stairs, her eyes huge in her white face. Bellamy followed the direction of his eyes and gave a start. "The bride? That girl!"

Pointing to Marina, the agent shouted to his men, "Seize her!"

Then the interrogations began, each of them examined separately in the library of the castle, starting with Marina. Bellamy saw that she was tense with fear. She stood before him in the center of the room, a tall, slender girl with her virginal state stamped all over her. The agent felt a pang of disgust. He resented having been selected for the mission in the first place.

Now, eying Marina shrewdly, he felt angrier still. To waste his considerable talents in interrogating children! To send him into the wilds of Northumbria and risk ambush by the staunch Catholics in the region for this! Of what consequence was Marina Dudley? For that matter, of what consequence was Sir Guy Percy in his backwater of a castle when far more important matters required his attention closer to London?

But no, he fumed, Francis Walsingham must have the claim investigated. No stone must be left unturned when the Queen's reputation was at stake. Walsingham, he thought irritably, was fast becoming ridiculous in hounding those he suspected of plotting to bring down his sovereign. Bah! Bellamy seethed inwardly, to squander

my precious time like this! If indeed there was anything hatching here at remote Chiltern Castle, this young girl was certainly not behind it and no more than a puppet manipulated by Percy and his overly ambitious friends.

"Sit down." He waved Marina to a chair drawn up to the library table and seated himself across from her. For a moment he regarded her in silence. Walsingham's agent was forty years old, an intense man far more governed by ambition than emotion; the charms of women stirred him less than the lust for power. Yet when he drew the candlestick closer and her face was clearly illuminated, Marina's beauty made a strong impression on him, especially her arresting dark brown eyes very similar to those of the Queen's favorite, Robert Dudley.

Bellamy inhaled sharply. Christ's soul, he thought, staring at her, imagining now that he saw other resemblances; was it possible? For years the rumors had persisted, always strenuously denied. Yet

"'Twill go better for you if you are truthful, mistress," he began. "Did you claim to be the Queen's daughter?"

The whole story came out about the incident at the Harvest Ball, and the instant Marina mentioned the name Sedina, Bellamy threw himself back in the chair. Sedina! How often had *that* particular name come to the attention of the secret police, always in connection with some mischief perpetrated against the Queen. They had tried and failed to find the fellow, who had proved to be as elusive as the wind, but wherever he had tarried on his journey of destruction he had left much trouble behind for those foolish enough to offer him lodgings.

"Hummm . . ." The agent pursed his lips. "Were there any other foreigners at the harvest ball?"

Marina shook her head. "N-nay, sir. Sedina was entertained here only because we have a tradition of offering hospitality to travelers here in the North. We"she swallowed"had no idea that the man was up to mischief."

He was inclined to believe her, experienced as he was in examining people, and he was more convinced than ever that he had come all this way for naught. It angered him, and he leaned forward suddenly and caught her lovely young face between steely fingers and looked deep in her eyes, determined to put the fear of death in her.

"Do you know, Marina Dudley, that because of the treasonable claim you made your name will be marked?"

"M-marked . . . ?"

The agent nodded. "Marked down in a special book kept by my Lord Walsingham, where the names of dissidents and subversives are noted. Such people are closely watched, and should they come to our atten-

tion again . . ." He let her imagination do the rest, certain it would conjure up a diabolical picture of what happened to these people. After a minute he waved her away. "You may go."

Sir Guy Percy's interview lasted considerably longer.

"You put the girl up to it," Bellamy charged. "Name the others in the plot."

Percy's broad face darkened with indignation. "I did no such thing! And there is no plot. The Spaniard simply stopped here on his way south from Scotland, and in these parts we never refuse food or lodgings to a weary traveler, that is all."

The agent lounged back in his chair and took another tack. "You are all Catholics here, so where is your priest?"

Sir Guy feigned surprise at the question, and lied, "There is no priest at Chiltern Castle, sir. In this house we adhere to the edicts of the Crown."

"If one is found you will be hanged."

Percy was confident that Father Ridley would never be found. At the same time he sensed that Bellamy was clutching at straws. Except for the unfortunate remark made by Marina, Walsingham's agent had nothing incriminating against him though he was trying mightily to find something.

Percy reminded himself that he was the master of this castle, a fortress deep in the heart of Catholic England. In these parts Bellamy, rather than himself, should have a care. At this very moment, Percy doubted not, news of the visit by Walsingham's agents would have flashed over the countryside. The scouts from the various estates would have spotted them and hastened to inform their masters to be alert for trouble. The visit would by no means have passed unnoticed.

Feeling more confident, Sir Guy said, "You may search all you wish but you will find no priest here, sir. I tell you now that you are wasting your time."

The two men faced each other, and Bellamy felt the subtle change in Percy's manner. True, he was the servant of the mighty Francis Walsingham, the agent reflected, one of the most feared men in the country, but London was very far away and Chiltern Castle was in the midst of territory dominated by powerful Catholics such as the Duke of Northumberland, the Dacres, Percys, and others. These people all had large families and hordes of friends to support them; many had private armies ever prepared to do battle. He ran a finger around his ruff, beginning to sweat a little, wondering if he and his men would get away from the district safely once they finished here at Chiltern Castle.

For form's sake Bellamy kept Sir Guy in the interrogation room for another hour, trying every tactic he could think of to trip him into admitting some sort of culpability anything! It irked him to think of having to return to London with absolutely nothing. But Percy was quick-thinking and just as determined not to be trapped.

Finally, exasperated, Bellamy snapped, "You maintain a lax household, Sir Guy. Would you have that girl lead you by the nose to the place where a noose will be put about your neck?"

The other didn't deign to reply, but he was furious at Marina.

The next morning at dawn Bellamy and his men rode away from Chiltern Castle, and by evening of that same day a messenger arrived from Lord Dacre. In silence he handed Sir Guy a sealed letter. It was brief. In light of what had happened, wrote Dacre, the marriage contract between his son Nevil and Marina

Dudley was null and void. "Few of us can afford to come to the notice of Sir Walsingham," wrote his lordship. "I could not bring such attention to my House. Therefore, it is with the deepest regret . . ."

"Bedamned!" Percy cried, and tossed the letter into his wife's lap as she sat before the fire in their private suite, Lady Maud still weak and shaken by the events of the last twenty-four hours. "This is a fine stew!" her husband raved on, stamping up and down the room in a high state of agitation. "We must get her gone from here, but I ask you, who will have her now?"

"I know of one," his lady replied with a strange smile, "though he might not be to her taste."

"Taste! What care I about her silly whims and notions?" he scoffed. "Of more concern to me, lady, is to keep this head upon my shoulders. Name the man!"

When she did so, Sir Guy burst out laughing, explosive laughter after the tension he had been under. He roared and slapped his thighs in glee until the tears ran down his cheeks, then went to his wife and kissed her, chuckling, "You are a clever lass, my Maud, that you are! Aye . . . this will be her just deserts considering the danger she has brought to our door. I will go to see the lucky groom at once."

She raised her brows. "Tomorrow night?"

" 'Tis pointless to delay."

She nodded, grinning. "I think we both know what his answer will be."

In the morning Sir Guy went to Marina's chamber and broke the news to her, first, that she wouldn't be marrying Nevil Dacre after all. The girl didn't seem dismayed, and that angered Percy, so he went on harshly, "But we have found another husband for you. Edgar Stafford."

Now she *was* dismayed, and that gratified the man watching her.

"Nay, I beg of you!" Marina cried, aghast at the idea. "Not Edgar Stafford! Hehe's a hard, embittered man and old enough to be my grandfather." He was also, she knew, one of the meanest men alive, even though it was whispered that he had a large horde of money hidden away somewhere in his dank hall. For all that, Stafford had never been known to spend a penny on anyone, let alone himself, and lived in a crumbling manor badly in need of repair, with few servants to attend to his wants simply because he was too stingy to pay them. But there were other aspects of Stafford's character that troubled her more. He was at least sixty years old, rough and uncouth, a fanatical Catholic who hated anyone outside his own religion and he'd had two wives already, both deceased. These wives had died under mysterious circumstances, events that had caused much whispered gossip at the time, something to do with the fact that neither had been able to give him children.

In desperation Marina faced up to her guardian, crying, "I refuse to wed Edgar Stafford! I'd rather die!"

Percy strode over to her and slapped her face.

"You will wed him," he grated between clenched teeth, "for the simple reason that no one of consequence will have you now, and you can blame yourself for that, mistress. Further, my lady and I long for peace here, something we can never enjoy with you in the house, so you will marry him if I have to drag you to the altar by the hair of your head and whip the vows out of you. You've tarried under this roof long enough!"

Marina looked up at him bleakly, her dark eyes overflowing, and something made him add, "He will make few demands. 'Tis said he is impotent."

Three days later Marina left Chiltern Castle with her new husband and his small retinue of guards. Stafford's near-derelict manor lay five miles over the frost-hardened countryside, a region of craggy hills and wind-blasted moorland, territory that echoed the bleakness in the bride's heart.

As they rode along in silence, Marina reflected that her life was over before it had truly begun. Though she cringed at the thought of Edgar Stafford touching her, still it was sad to realize that she was married to an old man, an impotent man, and would never have a child of her own now, a little one to shower with all the love bottled up in her heart. She had no memory of her parents at all; both had died from smallpox before Marina's third birthday, and the little she knew of them had come from Maud Percy, whose relative her father had been. Sir Guy had never spoken about her parents at all.

At the thought of her guardian, Marina's depression was suddenly replaced by a blazing anger, and something sweet and tender in her nature was nipped and encased in ice, as the frost will petrify the flowers of autumn. She hated him! Aye, and she hated his lazy, conniving wife, for Marina had known through listening to the castle servants gossip that Lady Maud was not quite all she seemed, nor above lying and trickery. The pair seemed cozy enough together now, but in their youth, so it seemed, their relationship had been stormy, so stormy that Maud Percy had once left her husband and lived with a gentleman near London for nigh on a year. And this couple, with a past that didn't bear looking at too closely, thought to arrange *her* future!

"You are quiet, wife," Edgar Stafford suddenly remarked. "And I

perceive that you look sad. A bride should not be so on her wedding day."

Depressed and disgruntled, Marina snapped, "A bride who is forced into marriage is never happy."

He brought his horse closer to hers and stared into her face.

Except for her sullen expression, Edgar Stafford was well pleased by what he saw. He could not believe his good luck in landing such a bride, and though he hated everything Francis Walsingham stood for, he was inclined to thank him at this moment when he beheld the girl who was now his wife. With her golden-blond hair, smooth, firm skin, and eyes that could melt a man's soul, she stirred animal instincts in him that he had thought long dead. On this woman, Stafford felt certain, he would finally beget the son and heir that he craved and had long been denied him. Looking at her, he suddenly felt younger than his sixty-two years, young and eager and impatient as a fellow half his age to tumble his bride into the marriage bed.

He said, "Most girls must wed the man their father or guardian thinks best for them. How can they, in their inexperience, think of choosing for themselves? The idea is ridiculous."

Unhappy as she was, Marina threw caution to the winds. "And I suppose it is *not* ridiculous to link a girl of sixteen to a man over sixty," she retorted sarcastically with a haughty toss of her head.

Stafford sucked in a sharp breath and his heavily lined face darkened. With an embarrassed glance at their escort, some eight stalwarts far past their prime and because of it men who cost him little, he hissed, "Quiet, you insolent chit! 'Tis a taste of the rod you need." He lowered his brows at her. "I warn you, girl, you will not make mischief for me as you did for Sir Percy. You will show respect and obey. And you will make an effort to please me." Never a subtle man who

minced words, Edgar bluntly stated his reasons for marrying her. "I want a son and you will give me my heir."

"That," replied the bride, "will be a miracle."

They arrived at Baxton Hall, a haphazard straggle of gray stones slumped within a small wood. The manor was very ancient and had been added to by generations of Staffords through the centuries so

that it could no longer claim to be any particular style except that of mass confusion. There were twin towers at either end of the building, some of the stones were chipped away in places, and malevolent-looking little slitted windows that had never been glazed allowed the chill winds ever blowing across the moor to gust inside the house. Baxton Hall seemed shrouded in gloom. As they rode into the courtyard, no cheery lights twinkled from the manor to welcome the bride to her new home, though indeed even a bonfire could not have cheered Marina at that moment.

"Tar, see to the horses," said Stafford, tossing the reins of his mount to his squire. Then with a determined glint in his eyes he grasped Marina around the waist and with a strength that surprised her lifted her down from her horse.

The moment she stepped inside Baxton Hall, Marina could see that the place had been neglected for years. In fact, it gave off an aura much like its master, one of roughness, shabbiness, squalor. There were no tapestries on the walls, no silver or painted china or color about the place as there had been at Chiltern Castle, and the only furniture and little enough of that was of worm-eaten black oak. Further, the hall Marina stepped into was dirty. She could not hide the look of disgust that crossed her face when she sniffed the rank, stale air not that she needed to hide it to spare the feelings of her husband, who never con-

cerned himself with such delicate sensibilities. Edgar Stafford was in every way a simple man governed by basic emotions, a coarse, uncultured man with no interest in the so-called finer things in life. The finer things, after all, cost a great deal of money.

There was a small fire burning in the hall only because it was needed to take the edge off the damp, frigid air in the chamber. The marriage "feast" served to the pair by a slatternly female servant about the same age as her master was a poor meal indeed, consisting of watery pheasant soup, hare stew, the meat grey and stringy, and chunks of rye bread, with acrid cheese to follow instead of pastries and puddings as one might have expected.

While toying with the food on her plate, Marina sent furtive glances across the table to her husband. She supposed he was remarkably hale and hearty for his age. He made her think of a gnarled old oak with his short, square body that at one time must have been very strong, and his weather-beaten face of a brownish-red hue, the large, pitted nose, grizzled hair and beard. In the past, Marina had heard, Stafford

had distinguished himself as a soldier. "The man was born to fight," she had once overheard Sir Guy remarking. Even now, old as he was, he joined the young bucks of the area in their frequent raids across the border into Scotland and had kept up his ongoing battle with the Protestants in England ever since they had come to power. Many there were hereabouts who admired Edgar Stafford, but there were others, women in particular, who whispered that he was a crude beast. "One must wonder," Lady Maud herself had mused aloud, "what *really* happened to those wives of his . . ."

He made no attempt to engage his bride in conversation during the meal. All his concentration was

reserved for eating, and to watch him eat made Marina a little sick. Ignoring the knife that had been provided, he scooped up the stew with his fingers and shoveled it into his mouth, mopping the gravy with hunks of bread, then wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He ate like a dog, thought Marina, her stomach churning, but she noted that he certainly had a healthy appetite for a man of his advanced years.

The moment he was finished he hauled Marina upstairs to the marriage bed.

"Disrobe," Stafford ordered her curtly.

"Nay . . . I"

Grabbing her, Edgar ripped off her clothes and threw her naked across the bed, the impact of her body causing a thick cloud of dust to billow up from the threadbare coverlet. Then his callused hands were all over her, squeezing her breasts, roughly fondling her buttocks, her stomach, and thrusting thick fingers between her thighs. When she choked in revulsion, desperately fighting him off, finally screaming when he began to hurt her with his coarse wooing, Stafford commenced to beat her savagely, panting, "I am your husband! I have every right! Must I knock you senseless before I can take what is my due?"

Just when Marina thought she would faint or be sick, Stafford got up off the bed and began to undress and then she saw the reason for his impotence.

" 'Twas an old wound got in battle," he muttered when he caught the direction of her eyes, "but a clever woman can overcome it, one who knows how to play the vixen." Breathlessly he threw himself down

beside her on the bed, without a care that the girl he dragged into his arms was no vixen but a lass who had never lain with a man before and had no way of knowing how to please him, even had she wanted to.

The next hour was a nightmare for Marina as

Stafford panted and sweated over her while hissing lewd commands into her ear, instructions that made her gag, vile as they were. Each refusal earned her another blow as her lord was made wild with frustration, lusting for her but unable to satisfy that lust in the way he most wanted to. Finally, exhausted, he left her and barged down the corridor to his study to drink himself insensible.

The same thing was repeated the next night, and the one after, and by the end of her first month of marriage the beautiful young bride was no more. No one at Chiltern Castle would have recognized her now, battered and bruised as she was, all the brightness and youthful confidence knocked out of her. He had pulled out her hair by the fistful, blackened both of her eyes, and made a red pulp of her soft mouth. Her body ached so much that she limped when she walked, and her right wrist, the hand he kept forcing on himself, felt as if it had been broken. But it was Marina's spirit that her husband *really* wanted to break. If she would only do all he bid her, Stafford convinced himself, then he could get her with child; if she would do it with the proper enthusiasm.

With each indignity, each blow, something hardened to stone in the young girl's heart. She blamed the Percys for her predicament, but even more she blamed Sedina, the Spaniard. He, after all, had been the one to suggest that she might be the Queen's bastard.

Thinking about that after her husband had left her one night to shut himself up in his study to drink, Marina who only had the Percys' word for it that Walter and Lisle Dudley had been her parents suddenly wondered if Sedina's outrageous suggestion could be true. Imagine! she thought the Queen of England and Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester! No,

no, it was too fantastic.

Even if it *had* been true, much good it had done her!

She rose from the rumpled bed and limped to the window and gazed

out hopelessly into the black night. Oh, she thought, to be free of all this! To find a way to escape before Edgar completely lost his head and killed her. How wonderful that would be!

At the beginning of December, eight weeks after her marriage to Stafford, Edgar's squire suddenly burst into the hall one evening when they were at supper.

"There be strangers arrived," Tar announced. "Scottish, by the sounds o' them."

"Holy mother!" Stafford sprang to his feet in alarm. "Warn the men."

The squire hesitated. "They say they come in peace."

3

The arrival of Alexander Sinclair and his party caused a great flurry of excitement at Baxton Hall. Stafford and his crew immediately scrambled for their weapons, ready to attack the instant they detected the slightest sign of hostility from the intruders. They had assured Tar, Edgar's squire, that they came in peace, but Stafford had never trusted Scotsmen, formerly their enemies. While a treaty of alliance had been concluded between Scotland and England in 1586 and they were now ostensibly at peace, old, deeply ingrained hatreds lingered on in the minds of many.

Stafford's keen eyes noted at once that the newcomers had had a hard ride and were now clearly exhausted. Though far younger and more vigorous-looking than his own aging men, they seemed in no mood to do battle, at least for the moment. He also spied a badly wounded man among them, supported by two others. Edgar took stock of their leader, a big

fellow clad in the best of riding gear, even though it was ripped and dusty; he guessed that they had recently been engaged in some fight and had come out the worst of it.

"Your name, sir?" he demanded of Sinclair. "And I would know why you came to Baxton Hall."

"Alexander Sinclair is the name, and we are lately come from Fotheringay Castle where we tried, and unfortunately failed, to free the Queen of Scots," Alex replied. Pointing to the ashen-faced fellow

carried between two others, he went on, "My friend is in a very bad way and has commenced spitting up blood. We thought to rest in the woods hereabouts tonight, and came upon your manor."

"Bedamned!" Edgar whistled. He could not help but be impressed by their daring, especially following the disastrous Babington Plot and the hideous deaths suffered by the conspirators. As a rabid Catholic, Edgar was quite prepared to back the devil himself in any scheme to overthrow the Protestants, and Satan and Scotsmen were synonymous in his mind. Would that their plan had succeeded, he thought with a sigh. Though they were obviously weary and travel-worn, he felt that these men were gentlemen, not the usual rabble he encountered during his occasional raiding forays over the border, and he relaxed a little. Anyway, he reminded himself, some of his own crew were at that moment hidden on the balcony above, bows in hand, prepared for action if it were called for.

Stafford waved them over to the fire. "Sit down and take your ease. I would hear all about this plot of yours."

"First, I would attend to my injured comrade," said Sinclair. "Is there water and mayhap some clean rags?"

Up to now Marina had been ignored. She sat

huddled to the side of the huge stone fireplace trying to make herself as inconspicuous as possible. Like most people in the area, she was afraid of Scotsmen; she had heard of the terrible battles that had taken place in the past, and even today there was the odd clash between the Scots and her own people, cattle stolen, a farmstead burned, women raped. The one who caught her attention was their leader; in appearance at least he was a wonderful specimen of a mantall, dark, exceedingly comely, the most handsome man she had ever beheld.

"You, wench" Marina gave a start when her husband barked at her "fetch the Scotsman water and bindings." He added in an expansive tone, "And bid Aggie bring in bread and ale."

Bread and ale! Marina's face flushed scarlet with embarrassment, thinking that it was plain to anyone with eyes in their heads that the strangers were utterly exhausted and famished. They needed good meat and wine to restore them, and all her miserly husband could offer them was the sourdough bread of the house and the even sourer ale! She was mortified. Even the poorest cotter in Northumberland could have done better than that. Here they took pride in being

hospitable to weary travelers, and Edgar, she knew, was far from poor.

As she fled to fetch the water, Marina glanced back from the door to see Sinclair carrying the ailing man to the hearth, where he gently laid him down on the bare floor, there being no chairs or settles at Baxton Hall as there had been at Chiltern Castle. She felt so ashamed of their dismal, cheerless hall. Scotsmen they might be, and of course one had to be very careful, but these men struck her as being a cut above the average and not the usual rabble at all. Sinclair had treated his wounded companion almost tenderly,

which impressed Marina.

When she returned to the hall struggling with a heavy iron pail of water, Alexander Sinclair glanced up and saw her. Instantly he was on his feet, hurrying forward to take it from her hands. "This is much too heavy for a lass to carry," he said in his pleasant Northern accent. Alex wondered at the same time what kind of a man her father was to order his daughter to handle such a heavy task. He almost dropped the pail when the girl looked up and he saw the dreadful bruises and swelling on her face. "Dear Christ!" he said. "What happened to you?"

Marina hastily put a finger over her mouth, her eyes darting to Stafford. So, Sinclair thought, angered, her father was responsible for the beating, and what a beating! It sickened Alex to think what the girl must have suffered. Stafford immediately plunged in his estimation. But there was nothing he could do, so with a sympathetic smile one that lit up his dark face Sinclair turned his attention on Rab Hamilton while the rest of his friends looked on in concern, fearing the worst. The wounded man was delirious, his skin burning hot though even by the paltry fire it was cool in the hall. As Alex bent over him, easing back his shirt to expose a deep shoulder wound several weeks old, one that had never healed, his mind went back to that swift, fierce battle on the plain near Fotheringay Castle in September. In retrospect Sinclair supposed that they had been insanely reckless. Queen Mary had been escorted by more soldiers than they had been led to expect by their spies, but when they had struck, taking the soldiers by surprise, Alex had actually managed to get within twenty feet of the Queen's litter before the startled soldiers had regrouped and finally driven them back.

Two of their comrades had been killed outright.

Another, young Jamie Fraser, had been taken prisoner. Now they

could only hope for his own sake that Jamie had had time to drink his flask of poison before being imprisoned in the Tower of London.

Marina watched him gently bathing Hamilton's wound with the clean cloth she had handed to him; strips she had torn from her wedding gown! She watched Sinclair's face as he performed this task and thought that he looked sad. He was thinking that while it might have been mad of them to try to free the Queen, it had probably been her last chance of freedom on this earth. Even in Edinburgh they were saying that Mary's end was near now, that Elizabeth, terrified to execute her before for fear of foreign attack, had finally allowed her ministers to persuade her to risk it.

Once Hamilton had been made as comfortable as possible and the Highlanders had partaken of the humble fare provided by their host, Alex told their story. Edgar Stafford sighed when he finished. "It bodes ill for the Scottish Queen now, but what I cannot understand is why her son, King James, does not do more to help his mother. What kind of a son is he?" he sneered.

King James had never known his mother. He had only been an infant when her rebellious nobles had forced Mary to abdicate in favor of her son. His uncle the Earl of Moray had ruled Scotland in his place as regent. Moray did not live long to enjoy his high position, but other regents followed. In the meantime, the boy king had been raised in the household of the Earl of Mar, a fervent Protestant who had poisoned James's mind against his mother. James grew up believing that Mary had conspired with Lord Bothwell to kill his father, Darnley. His advisers warned him too to keep in the good graces of Queen Elizabeth

so that one day he might inherit her crown, thus uniting Scotland and England at last.

"The King has been raised to believe that he has nothing to gain by fighting to have his mother freed, and *everything* to gain by fostering the friendship with his cousin Elizabeth," said Alexander. "Besides, Scotland is also a Protestant country as is England, so in that they are united too."

"A pox on them!" cried Stafford. "Now we have a bastard sitting on the throne of England, for I tell you this, that farce of a marriage Henry VIII went through with Anne Boleyn was no true marriage at all, nor was it legal."

Marina sat unobtrusively by the inglenook trying to hide her battered face from the curious eyes of the newcomers and especially from Sinclair. She was ashamed of how she must look to him, especially when he was so comely himself. It was pleasant to listen to his deep voice discussing the political situation, to watch his expressive face, the way his brilliant green eyes flashed in the firelight. He was no barbarian, that much Marina could tell. The Scotsman was far more cultured and well-mannered than Edgar Stafford and more compassionate too, and his bold venture dazzled her. She could have listened to him and watched him all night.

But they would be leaving at first light in the morning! Marina's heart sank. They never had guests in the house. Her husband was too mean to spend a penny to entertain them. There was no interesting conversation, as they were having tonight, no laughter, music, or merriment of any kind. Baxton Hall had a depressing, tomblike atmosphere, and all she had to look forward to was the pain and humiliation Edgar Stafford inflicted on her nightly.

Oh God, Marina thought desperately, if only she

could somehow escape!

Sinclair felt her staring at him and raised his head, and their eyes met. He saw the entreaty in those eyes and suddenly noticed their beauty. What was she trying to say to him? he wondered, feeling sorry for her and angry at her father. The mess the fellow had made of her face! He was a brute and scoundrel to treat any woman thus, especially his own daughter. Idly Alex wondered what she must *really* look like. At the moment it was impossible to tell.

The hour was growing late and Stafford stood up. With a wave to Marina he ordered, "Get above stairs, wife. I will shortly follow."

Wife! Alexander was astounded. He had assumed the young girl was Stafford's daughter, or even his granddaughter. Worse that she was actually wed to the knave, linked to him for life, the butt of his abuse. He deeply pitied her and wished there was something he could do to help her. Tied to a man like Stafford, her very life was in danger!

"Doubtless, you will be leaving at dawn?" Edgar inquired.

Alex eyed him coldly as he nodded. It was all he could do to be civil, muttering, "Thank you for your hospitality, sir." Though it had hardly been worth thanking him for! He and his men were still starving and

Rab Hamilton desperately needed strong wine or spirits to revive him, also a warm blanket to cover him and ward off the damp chill now that the fire was dying down. It hadn't shamed Stafford when Alex and two of his friends had taken off their jerkins to cover the wounded man, whose skin, he had noticed, felt suddenly quite cool.

"I'll bid you farewell now," their host said. "These old bones of mine protest when I rise early." Usually he was too drunk to leave his bed before noon.

"Good eve," Alex responded curtly.

Long after the others were asleep, Alexander sat gazing into the embers of the fire thinking about their abortive mission. He found failure hard to bear. He was worried too about Jamie Fraser, the lad taken prisoner. If Jamie lived to reach the Tower he would be tortured and the names of his fellow conspirators forced out of him. As it was, the rest of them had been lucky to get away alive. Walsingham had immediately sent soldiers to comb the country in search of them, and once or twice, crossing England while making for the border, they had almost been caught. They'd had to go into hiding for several weeks until the hubbub died down, then, traveling mostly at night, had made their way to Northumberland and the border.

Tomorrow they would be on Scottish soil! Ah, thought Sinclair, how good it will be to be home at last. His roving days would then be over and he would have to settle down to the task of helping to administer the family estates. He supposed too that the time had come to start thinking about a wife. But, he had decided, there would be no cold-blooded arranged marriage for him! He had yet to meet a woman who held his interest for long, let alone one he felt willing to share his life with.

Always when Alex thought of marriage his parents came into his mind. What a love affair theirs had been! His mother, Lady Alyssa, had only been his father's mistress when she gave birth to Alex, though they had been able to marry later on. While the circumstances of his birth had made life a bit awkward for him, the love between his parents rather rare among the nobility had always been an example of what was possible, the kind of marriage he would strive for himself. Of course his younger brother, David, safely born in wedlock, would one day be

the chief of their clan. Alex had come to terms with the situation years

ago; he felt quite capable of making his own way in the world.

He suddenly noticed that his friend Rab Hamilton lay staring fixedly at the ceiling, his eyes glazed in the smoldering embers of the fire. An icy jolt went through the young nobleman. In trepidation, his heart beating fast, Alex leaned forward and put a hand on his cheek, which was cold. A quick examination verified the fact that Hamilton was dead.

"Dear Christ!" Alex sat back on his heels, staring down at the lad who hadn't yet reached his twenty-first birthday. He felt a choking sorrow to think that his boyhood friend, one who had shared many a mischief with him while they were growing up, was no more. Gently he drew one of the jerkins that covered him over his head, musing that Hamilton had died for a good cause. He had been a lad who had always imagined himself doing mighty deeds for a noble cause.

Where would they bury him? The ground outside was frozen and they were still on English soil. Though they were close to the border, they were still a very long way away from their homes in the Highlands of Scotland.

A sudden cry from upstairs distracted Sinclair, turning his mind from his dead friend to the child-wife of their host. He could well imagine what was happening up there, and when another faint cry drifted eerily through the silent manor, Alex sprang to his feet and drew out his dagger. "By the rood," he muttered, "I can tolerate no more of this!"

Moving stealthily as a cat, he made for the stairs with the weapon in his hand and had reached the landing when the door to the bridal chamber banged open and Edgar Stafford plunged out holding a tat-

tered quilt around his nakedness. Alex flattened himself against the wall as Stafford barged down the corridor and into a room at the end. He made immediately for a keg that sat atop a tall kist, viciously turned the spigot, and filled a pewter cup with the yellow liquid that gushed out. Swallowing it, he kicked the door shut, closeting himself in the room for his nightly drinking binge.

Alex glanced around, wondering where the guards might be. He had noticed that they had drifted away while he and Stafford were talking downstairs, possibly satisfied that the Scotsmen meant them no harm. His eyes were drawn to the partially open door of the master chamber, and after waiting a few minutes, listening into the silence when the only sound he could hear was from the room Stafford had now

entered, Alex warily made his way to the room his host had just vacated, bracing himself for what he might find there.

The young wife lay naked among the rumpled sheets, stunned by a blow to the head. As he stood over her, Alex saw the reddened marks of cruel fingers imprinted on her breasts, the scratches on her stomach and thighs. Furious, for her lovely young body was a mass of welts and bruises, the old mingling with the new, he felt like flying down the corridor to kill Edgar Stafford, the beast who had caused it all. But he saw that the girl was in desperate need of attention, moaning softly from lips that were puffed and bloody. Sinclair glanced around the dismal chamber and spied a pitcher and bowl on a chest. He quietly closed the door and poured water into the basin and carried it to the bed, lowering himself to sit on the edge.

Gently he drew the covers up over Marina's nakedness, then soaking an edge of the quilt in the bowl, he bent forward and very gingerly dabbed her cut lips.

She flinched, and her eyes fluttered open. Alex quickly placed a warning finger over his mouth.

At first Marina was dazed. When her wits cleared, she was astonished to find Sinclair beside her and for a few seconds thought she was dreaming. She lay gazing up at him in wonder as he gently bathed her face and sponged the blood off her lips. He looked like an angel to Marina at that moment.

Then it all came rushing back and she caught his hand, whispering, "W-where is he?" terror in her voice.

Alex bent his head to her ear. "In the chamber down the passageway but soon to be in hell once I have finished with him!"

"Nay . . . you must not risk a battle," she warned him. "His men are hereabouts. Normally they sleep in the bothy behind the stables, but" she drew a shuddering breath "I think tonight, with strangers in the house, that they might be in the kitchen." Marina clung to his hand as to a lifeline. "I must get away from here before he kills me."

Sinclair fully concurred, and suggested, "We might be able to take you out when we go," not sure if she would accept. She was certainly in a dire position, but as some might see it, Better a devil you know than one you don't, and he and his friends were total strangers and foreigners as well. He wasn't sure she would trust them, nor would he

have blamed her if she didn't. But at mention of leaving Baxton Hall the girl's eyes filled with hope. "Oh, could you?" she breathed.

"We can try." Alex wanted to ask about her family and why they hadn't done something about her desperate situation, but the moment he agreed to help her, Marina lifted his hand and pressed it to her bruised cheek. "Thank God!" she murmured. "You are the answer to my prayers, Lord Sinclair. Had fate

not brought you here tonight, I doubt that I would have been alive at Christmas."

He was touched. Flattered too that she was quite prepared to trust him. Her plight brought out all his chivalrous instincts, much the same instincts that Queen Mary had aroused. This girl too was in peril of losing her life if something wasn't done to help her, and the first step was to remove her from the clutches of her evil husband. No doubt, he thought, she had friends or relatives who would take her in.

"What is your name?" he asked softly.

"Marina, sir. 'Twas Marina Dudley until I married *him*!" There was anger in her voice and her beautiful dark eyes flashed with resentment. Alex was glad to see that her spirit hadn't been completely broken.

"Then I will call you Marina Dudley," he told her with a slight smile. "I can see that that will be more to your taste."

Marina nodded emphatically, grateful for his understanding. She looked up at the handsome young cavalier and was instantly madly in love. Everything about Sinclair inspired great confidence in the girl: his strength and courage and air of command, his noble features, glossy black hair, and brilliant green eyes. He seemed akin to a god to her and she idolized him, and though he was a Scotsman, she knew she would be willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. No one had ever shown her such interest, such tenderness before and he a stranger! Suddenly, in one of her impulsive gestures, Marina covered his hand with worshipful kisses. "How splendidly kind and brave you are," she told him.

Alex was moved. She was hardly more than a child and seemed quite helpless to him and, though married, strangely innocent too. Without thinking he leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, more

determined than ever to get her away from Baxton Hall. Marina's starved heart melted at the contact. She sat up and threw her arms around his neck, pressing herself against him as if she would never let go. Sinclair was a little taken aback by her puppylike affection, but his arms closed around her instinctively. The bed covers had slipped down at her changed position, and his hands came in contact with her bare back, warm and soft as silk. He felt her breasts touch his chest, smelled the clean scent of her hair, and for an instant his arms tightened as he responded to the warmth and emotion flowing from the girl locked hard against him.

Alex was astounded when she burst out, "I worship you, Sinclair!"

He pushed her away from him, his eyes searching her face. "You know nothing about me," he reminded her, "and should not make such remarks to a man you do not know."

"I know that you are grand and that I adore you," Marina insisted.

What kind of woman was this? he wondered. Surely like none other that he had ever met. Most that he had encountered enjoyed flirting and playing coy games to keep a man guessing as to how they felt about him. Not so this one! Of course she was desperate, he reminded himself, and a woman would say and do just about anything in her position. He held her back from him, his eyes automatically flicking to her breasts. Proud and high they were and quite full for her age, the nipples rosy and erect from rubbing against him.

Alex, at sight of her nakedness, felt a powerful and instantaneous hardening of his own body before Marina, blushing, grabbed the sheets and wrenched them up to cover herself. Their eyes met and held, and in

that moment Alexander felt something stir to life deep inside him, something that went beyond mere desire. For a second he was confused at his odd reaction to the English girl. With the marks of violence on her face, Marina Dudley was far from comely, and he liked comely women. But there was that about her to appeal to a man just the same. It was a novel experience for Alex to be with a woman who did not try to hide her feelings, and flattering to find himself the object of such unabashed admiration.

He glanced at the door. "Remember," he whispered, "we are not out of this manor yet."

All Marina's fear came rushing back. "Edgar will soon drink himself into a stupor, then it will be easier to slip away. He rarely rises before noon."

"Then harken to me. I have thought of a way to take you out of here."

Their heads bent close and Alex explained his plan.

4

Nine people had ridden up to Baxton Hall the previous night and nine left it just after dawn the following morning, each bundled up in cloaks and hoods to protect them from the bitter cold. It was still not fully light and there was an inch or two of snow on the ground, but the Scotsmen galloped away fast in the semidarkness, the leader now and then glancing back.

A mile from the manor house Sinclair halted his party and looked at the smallest of the group, one almost swallowed up in a gray cloak, the hood pulled far forward so that her battered face was hidden from view. For Alex and his friends it had boiled down to a simple choice. Either they take a dead man out of Baxton Hall, one past all earthly suffering, or they take a live girl doomed to perpetual misery if she remained there. The decision had been unanimous. They must take the girl. It was what Rab would have wished them to do, they all agreed.

Alex walked his horse over to Marina's. "Where would you like us to take you?" he asked. Now that they had freed Marina there was no time to lose. At any moment Rab Hamilton's body could be discovered where they had left it in an upstairs chamber and Tar, Stafford's squire, would rouse his master to give chase. Aside from that, there was Walsingham's secret police to consider. The Scotsmen were, after all, still on English soil.

Alex felt a touch of impatience when Marina hesitated. "Mistress, where do you wish us to escort you?" he repeated. "We must make haste."

She bit her lip and shrugged, avoiding his eyes, then confessed, "Sir, in truth there is nowhere I can go."

"What?"

"My parents are dead and I have no close relatives," Marina explained, flushing when she saw them all staring at her now in dismay. "My former guardian the couple who raised me would never take me in. They were the ones who wed me to Stafford in the first place."

"But you said you led me to believe . . ."

Marina shook her head. "Nay, I said nothing except that I wanted out of that house."

Sinclair was angry, and Marina supposed that he had every right to be, but she had been frantic and had grabbed the first opportunity to come along, fearing there might never be another. Alex looked at his men; they too were annoyed. She could tell that some of them, perhaps including Sinclair, felt that she had somehow deceived them.

"Leave me here if you will," Marina cried. "You have done more for me than I can ever hope to repay. But but I would rather perish here on the moor than live another moment in Baxton Hall."

There was a tense silence, then the men muttered

their objections to the idea. Alex himself would never have considered abandoning her now. But where could he take her? He could well imagine the raised eyebrows and curious whispers if he returned home to the Highlands with the strange English girl in tow. It was out of the question.

"It grows light," one of the men pointed out nervously and they all turned to scan the wild countryside, alert for movement in the distance. Alex suddenly had an idea where he could take her to the home of Sir Ralph Cairnmore, the kindly knight who had been married to his maternal grandmother, Alicia, during the latter years of her life. It was the only place he could think of and fortunately a long way from his own home.

He eyed Marina coldly. "Are you prepared to go with us into Scotland?"

"Aye," she nodded at once, relief on her face, agreeing immediately without even stopping to consider the consequences. Sinclair's friends glanced at each other in amusement. One lad chuckled under his breath, "Even these English wenches are smitten with your manly charms, Sinclair," a remark that Marina overheard. A hot flush suffused her face, though it was true enough. At that moment she

would have followed him anywhere.

Alex nodded. Without another word to her he spurred up his horse and they all galloped in the direction of the Scottish border. Sinclair felt as if he had been manipulated. She should have told him last night that she had nowhere to go, he thought angrily. Though he was more than willing to help her, he wasn't prepared to take on total responsibility for the English girl, one who already had a husband. What a state of affairs! Fortunately, Sir Ralph Cairnmore was a warmhearted, courtly man and very fond of Alexan-

der. Hopefully, he would understand.

At least Scotland and England were reasonably friendly now, he reflected as they rode along. It had even become fashionable for noblemen in one country to send their offspring to be educated in the other, a politically and socially sensible idea considering that King James of Scotland would in all probability inherit the crown of England once Queen Elizabeth died. Then the two countries would be united at last. It was imperative that they make an effort to understand each other, as far as traditional enemies ever could, and the best way to insure this was through the exchange of their young people, the ones most open to change.

While still a lad Alexander had spent two years as a page at the court of Queen Elizabeth. Interesting, even exciting years they had been. The ceremony, the intrigue, the jockeying for position that went on among her courtiers had astounded young Alex. But he had learned a lot during those two years, especially that, though outwardly Scotland and England were now allies, behind the scenes much of the old enmity lingered on, neither quite trusting the other.

During his time in London Alex had come to the attention of the Queen, a woman who had a keen eye for beautiful young men. "Ah . . ." she had smiled when he was summoned to her presence, ". . . I remember your noble father well." She added with a throaty chuckle, "What woman would not!"

Queen Elizabeth had studied him closely. "My cousin of Scotland had a wise minister in your sire, young Sinclair. 'Tis a pity she didn't heed him more, eh?" This with a sly glance at Robert Dudley, who happened to be with her at the time. Alex's face had betrayed surprise. How could she know what advice his father had given Queen Mary? he wondered.

Elizabeth saw his puzzlement and said, "We have those in my government who keep us well informed of events in Scotland. Tell me, Lord Sinclair, are you a loyal subject of your King?"

"I am, Your Majesty," he'd replied.

"And are you also loyal to the King's mother?" Again she glanced at Dudley, who stood watching the exchange with a smile of amusement. Alex remembered him as being a comely, though arrogant man very conscious of his position closest to the Queen. *Very close*, according to the rumors at court.

Something in the way Dudley was looking at him and the way he felt that Elizabeth was toying with him for her own entertainment prompted Alex to answer boldly, "One must ever feel pity for a lady in Queen Mary's position."

Elizabeth's smile vanished. The answer was not to her liking. She walked over to Alex and cuffed him on the ear, though not *too* hard. "Know this, young sir, and learn it well," she said haughtily, "that those who invite trouble to themselves are rarely disappointed. Nor should they be pitied when it finds them. You would do well to reserve compassion for where it is truly deserved."

He had gone from that interview livid, seething that the Queen had embarrassed him in front of the Earl of Leicester. He was convinced too that Elizabeth was incapable of feeling compassion for anyone. "Would that I were older!" Alex remembered thinking then. "I would find a way to free Queen Mary myself."

The idea had been born then.

But the day after his meeting with the Queen a box of sweetmeats had been delivered to his room with a brief note penned in her own hand. "You looked sour when you left my Presence Chamber yesterday. Mayhap these will sweeten you up."

Alex had been slightly disarmed, pleased enough to gobble down the bonbons. She was clever, he had thought even then, a formidable stateswoman who unlike Mary Stuart never failed to put her people before everything else. Her subjects worshiped her. She was their Virgin Queen. Had she not given up all others to be true to them alone, including Robert Dudley, the man who for years had been desperate to marry her?

Of course she *hadn't* given him up, though the common people didn't know that. But at least she had never gone against their wishes and married him, as Mary Stuart had done with Lord Bothwell.

Now, as they raced for the Scottish border, Alex again felt depressed when he thought about his failed mission to free the Scottish Queen. Rash and impetuous Mary might have been, too frequently ruled by her emotions, but for all her failings he was certain he would have liked her better than Elizabeth. It saddened him to think that no one short of her son could help her now, and to do so King James would have to be willing to break the Anglo-Scottish alliance.

They covered the last mile and galloped across the border.

All the lads cheered and those wearing caps under their hoods threw them in the air, delighted to find their native soil under their feet once more. Marina smiled at their joy, and strangely enough, though she was now in a foreign land, she too felt safe. Alex spied the relief on her face and it disarmed him. Well, he thought, she certainly had faith in us, for all that we were strangers to her.

"Best we ride on a while yet," he told her. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful, my lord!" Marina laughed, her eyes lighting up in a way that he found entrancing. Those

eyes of hers . . . never had he seen any like them. So dark and sparkling, such a contrast to her thick blonde hair. Swollen and bruised or not, there were moments when he thought she looked almost pretty, and Sinclair couldn't help but notice how her whole expression melted when she looked at him. Failure he might be but not to Marina Dudley!

They stopped that first night at the Four Doves, a modest little inn much used by travelers moving between the two countries. Unassuming as it was, the accommodations were a huge improvement over dank Baxton Hall. A roaring fire greeted them in the common dining room, and all about them were the sounds of conviviality. It was like music to Marina's ears.

Sinclair's friends settled themselves at a long trestle table, but Alex, who was anxious to learn more about the girl he had now become responsible for, led Marina to a small table for two drawn up to the side of the fire. He ordered a hearty meal and flagon of good wine. "First we dine," he said. "Then I must have speech with you."

"Aye." Marina nodded eagerly, ready to fall in with whatever plans he had for her. She had the utmost trust and confidence in him. Sinclair had risked his life in trying to rescue the Queen of Scots, and failing, had rescued her instead! It seemed the very essence of romance to Marina. Free now, she glowed with excitement, some of her natural high spirits and exuberance coming to the fore. Alexander Sinclair had pried her loose from her bestial husband, swept her into a new country and a new life, and dazzling possibilities opened up to her. Marina gazed across the table at Alex with eyes brimming with adoration, feelings she was too young and innocent to think of concealing.

Surely, she thought, he was the bravest, kindest, most handsome man in the entire island.

"This is the happiest night of my life," she told him candidly.

Alex was nonplussed. "You are jesting?"

"Nay," Marina shook her head firmly. "It is true."

He saw that she meant it, and was touched, thinking that she must have lived very poorly indeed, for he could find nothing special about the evening, other than that it was the first meal he had had in Scotland for months.

He waved at her plate, beginning to feel a little embarrassed at the way she was gazing at him. Alex could feel his friends watching and could well imagine the remarks they were making. "Eat up," he told her gruffly. "The wine is quite good. It will revive you."

They dined on roast venison and pheasant, vegetables and custard pies, all washed down with copious amounts of Madeira. Marina wasn't used to wine, but thirsty as she was, she drank it like water. They were ravenous and ate with gusto. Marina had not enjoyed a decent meal since the day she married Edgar Stafford; nevertheless, even hungry as she was, Alex noticed that her table manners were dainty and refined. She had obviously been raised to be a lady, even if her husband hadn't treated her like one.

Alex became conscious of other diners sending furtive glances at their table, and no wonder! The inn was well lit, and Marina's battered face with its purple-and-yellow bruises seemed to glare, advertising that she had been badly beaten. He hoped they wouldn't think that *he* had been responsible, and wished now that they had eaten in their rooms.

Afraid that Marina would notice and be embarrassed, Alex scowled around the room challengingly and the others quickly looked away. But Marina hadn't noticed. All

her attention had been on him.

"Have you supped your fill?" he asked her solicitously.

She nodded. " 'Twas a delicious meal." But she was a little dizzy from the wine.

Alex leaned closer. "What beautiful eyes you have," he told her, to make up for her other shortcomings.

Marina was breathless with delight at the compliment. It was one she had heard many times before, but never so sweet as when it had come from him. "Your eyes are beautiful too," she remarked in her guileless way. "They shine like emeralds in the firelight."

Alex sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. He felt uncomfortable at her wide-eyed admiration. Marina was like no other woman he had ever known. Whatever she thought and felt came spilling out, and he surmised that she had had very little contact with the opposite sex before her marriage to Stafford. There was no coyness, no subterfuge about her, and though when she smiled her eyes had a flirtatious charm, he sensed that it was unconscious, therefore all the more appealing. Behind him he could hear his friends tittering. Doubtless, he thought, they were enjoying the entertainment. He had to admit he was rather enjoying it himself, rare as it was. Females were usually so careful not to betray how they felt about a man, fearing it would place them at a disadvantage.

"How old are you?" he asked her, curious.

"Sixteen, my lord."

"And Stafford?"

Her face sobered. "Over sixty."

It was all too often done, he reflected, wedding nubile young girls to old, usually rich, men, a practice he found disgusting. He had a sudden mental picture of how Marina had looked naked, then a picture of the

gnarled, flaccid Stafford, and was revolted. How could a doddering old graybeard like that have satisfied her? He doubted that she had ever known any bliss with him at all, or had any conception of how love could be in the arms of a *young* man.

"You said that you had no living kin willing to take you in, but what of the people who raised you?" Something must be arranged, he thought. Marina certainly couldn't stay with his grandfather forever.

"My guardians were Sir Guy and Lady Maud Percy. As a babe I was brought to Northumberland from Kent, where my parents lived, though I have no memory of them at all. They died of smallpox, I'm told. My sire was a cousin of Lady Maud's, and 'twas she, returning from a visit to her family, who brought me back to Chiltern Castle." Marina added ruefully, "There must have been money behind it, otherwise the Percys would never have raised me."

"And they wed you to that scurrilous old hound?"

"Aye." She looked angry. "He has my dowry, and knowing him, he'll never let it go. Edgar had two previous wives, neither able to give him children, and he thought that with me . . ." she broke off, flushing.

Alex gave a start. "Christ's blood, you are not with young, are you?"

"Nay." Marina's blush deepened and she looked down at her plate, too embarrassed to explain why she was so certain. Alex assumed that it was because her monthly flow had appeared as usual.

"That at least is a relief," he said.

Something in his tone made Marina look at him quickly, searchingly, and she saw him frown. It brought her down to earth with a crash, all her romantic mental pictures splintering. Pride made her say, "Mayhap I could find work . . . perhaps even here at this inn."

The idea was ludicrous and he waved it away. "You are a lady and could never work here. You know, don't you, that we have committed a crime by taking you away from your husband"

"Nothing to the crimes *he* committed while I was with him!" she shot back, her dark eyes blazing. Alex admired a woman with spirit and was heartened to see that Marina had plenty left in her yet. He chuckled, "What is one more crime after the dire one I perpetrated in trying to free Mary Stuart? One might as well be hanged for a wolf as

a lamb."

"Don't say that!" Marina was a little superstitious and she shivered at the mention of hanging. " 'Twas a courageous thing you did, and how I wish you had succeeded."

"I too." He looked glum and confessed, "Failure sits heavily on my shoulders, and to fail in such a good cause . . ."

She put a hand over his, distressed to see him so bleak. "They keep her so well guarded now that no one can get near her. Think of all who have tried through the years, even schemes generated by such as the King of Spaineven the Pope himself. All failures. You *tried*, my lord, and that alone marks you as one of the bravest men in the land."

He had to smile a little at her lavish praise, and chuckled, "Take care you don't swell my head."

"I but speak the truth."

He smiled at her, amused. "I'm afraid you have formed too high an opinion of me, so be warned. I'm no better or worse than the average fellowworse, some might say," he said with a grin. "Now you must be wondering where I am taking you." When she nodded, he explained, "We are bound for Cairnmore House in Ayrshire, the home of my stepgrandfather."

He is a kind man and will make you welcome."

It seemed fantastic to Marina how radically her life had changed in the space of two days. Had anyone told her a week ago that a wonderful man would come into her life and carry her away to live in Scotland, she would have thought they were mad. As for the future, well . . . she couldn't think of that now. Instead, she wanted to hang on to this very moment, with Sinclair sitting across the table, his strong face like dark copper in the firelight, his eyes resting on her, touching her with a kind of magic. Oh, she sighed inwardly, had she only been wed to a man like Alexander Sinclair! To lie in *his* armsheastily Marina looked away, afraid he might somehow read her thoughts.

Alex refilled her glass with wine, discovering that he liked the English girl. In a way Marina helped distract him from his bitter disappointment and worry about his captured friend, Jamie Fraser. He suddenly decided that he would do everything he could to help the

hapless girl. She had nothing now. Stafford was in possession of her dowry, a grave misfortune as far as her future was concerned. But Sinclair was rich in his own right and would do his best for her. It was strange how they had met . . . mayhap, he mused, there was something of fate in that.

Robert Douglas, one of his friends, appeared at their table.

"Well," said Douglas, "we are retiring now and bid both of you a good night. We are in sore need of a bath to wash the dust of the journey from our flesh." With mischief in his eyes he informed them, "I took the liberty of ordering a tub for you also, Sinclair, and for the young lady. I trust that is satisfactory?"

Alex nodded. "You did well, Douglas."

Robert glanced from one to the other, a twinkle in

his eyes. "I can see you wish to tarry here for a while, so I won't disturb you. Have a *very* enjoyable evening"

"Good night, my friend," Alex broke in firmly.

Douglas laughed and slapped him on the back and with the others tramped to the door, throwing many backward glances at their table, glances pregnant with meaning. Alex read them well, but Marina was gazing at him and didn't notice. He knew what they were thinking, that he would try to bed the girl, an idea that had never entered his head. But now that it had . . . he doubted not that he would do a better job of it than Edgar Stafford! Aye, his imagination raced on, he could bring her ecstasy such as she would never have tasted with her decrepit husband. And he, unlike her aging spouse, could make it last. Alex could feel his body stirring eagerly just thinking about it. It suddenly felt too hot in the room.

A serving girl came to their table to say that hot water had been taken to their rooms. Sinclair rose at once, but when Marina tried to stand, her head swam alarmingly and she had to grip the back of her chair to steady herself.

Alex laughed and took her arm. "You drank the wine too fast."

"Youyou shouldn't have kept refilling my glass." Even her voice was a little slurred.

"No matter, you'll sleep all the better for it," he assured her, and steered her into the foyer and up the stairs to the bedchambers. Leaning against the wall, breathing deeply to clear her head, Marina watched Alex unlock her door and throw it open; then he pressed the key into her hand.

"You must be very weary," he commented.

It was shadowy in the upstairs hallway and the noise in the common dining room and tavern seemed

distant. There was no one about, only the two of them, standing quite close. Alexander's eyes gleamed faintly in the bracket light at the top of the stairs; they seemed to probe her, as if seeking the answer to some question in his mind. There was a strange, hungry look on his face that made Marina's knees go suddenly weak.

"Thank you thank you for everything, my lord," she stammered, feeling breathless. The wine was making her head spin. It was overwarm in the inn. And the way Alexander was looking at her . . . a look that excited her, stirred her, made her quiver deep inside. He was so handsome, his wide shoulders thrown in shadow against the wall, his body tall and muscular, his face with that faint hint of ruthlessness because of the slight curve to his nose . . . but a face that thrilled her. Everything about him seemed strong and commanding and he was young! Young and virile, where Edgar . . .

He pointed into the chamber through the open door.

"There is the tub. The water will be growing cold."

Marina nodded, her face hot, hating to have this wonderful night end. She blurted without stopping to think, "Will you come in for a little while? Mayhap you could tell me more of Ayrshire."

His eyes raked her now, moving from her flushed face to her heaving breasts as she sought air in the stuffy hallway, and Marina felt something blaze up deep inside her like tongues of fire. He chuckled gruffly, "Did your guardian never warn you about inviting strange men into your room?"

"I trust you."

Alex raised his brows. "Marina, you hardly know me. But, being the gallant I am, I would not dream of doing anything to destroy your

high opinion of me," he told her, laughter in his eyes now. Turning her into

the room, he gave her a little push. "Bathe and retire," he said. "I bid you the sweetest of dreams."

The moment Alexander left her, all the sparkle and excitement went out of the evening. The very air seemed to fall flat though it was easier to breathe. Marina undressed and got into the tub, soaping her body and hair, rubbing herself hard with the cloth provided, splashing water on her face in the hopes that it would help to clear her mind. After a few minutes she began to regret having asked Alexander into her room and wondered what had possessed her. It was just that she enjoyed his company so much, loving the novelty of being with someone a little closer to her own age.

His friends barged into his room while Alex was bathing.

"What, no girl?" Robert Douglas teased. "You would abstain when she all but begged you on her hands and knees! I ask you" he appealed to the others "can this fellow in the tub be Alexander Sinclair?"

"Nay, nay it cannot be," the lads mocked. One said, "The Sinclair we know would have had her bedded by now."

Alex ignored their remarks and pointed to a chair. "Fetch me that towel," he said, standing up.

Douglas made a sweeping gesture from Sinclair's head to his feet.

"Behold the magnificence of that manly body. Think how it could have pleased that lonely lass down the hall, and he, the miserly knave, would withhold it from her."

"Quiet, you imbecile," Alexander growled, toweling himself vigorously and holding himself aloof from their laughter. They were all boisterous young men

he was one himself and he was used to their pranks and normally joined in, yet he had no taste for it tonight. In fact, it irked him.

"Bah! Who would want to bed a girl who looked like that?" said Ian Huntly. " 'Tis a pity for her, of course, but"

"In the dark her face would be hid," broke in another. "Beneath the

sheets all women feel alike."

Alex stopped drying himself and swung on the youth, a lad not yet nineteen and the youngest of the group. "Keith," he said sternly, "I would expect to hear a remark like that from a tinker's whelp, not from the son of Lord Seton."

Silence fell over the group as they stared at Alex in surprise, wondering what had gotten into him. While Seton's remark might have been a little crude, it was not like Sinclair to take it so seriously. They had brought a bottle of brandy and pack of cards in with them, but one look at Alexander's face a remote look that shut them out told them he wasn't interested in their company that night.

They glanced at each other questioningly, then Robert Douglas, who was engaged to marry Alex's sister, Kirstin, burst out, "Bigod, can it be that the Stafford lass refused you?"

"Aye," chimed in another, chuckling, "that would account for his sour mood."

Sinclair sighed. "I am weary this night and long for sleep. We have a long ride ahead of us tomorrow."

"Sleep!" a lad with bright red hair cried. "Forsooth, since when has Sinclair been too tired for bed sport?"

Alex waved at them in exasperation. "Enough!" He strode naked to his bed and threw himself down and closed his eyes. "Good eve to you. Don't bang the door on your way out."

For a moment longer they regarded him, puzzled,

then with a nod to the door Robert Douglas led them out and they *did* bang the door behind them.

Left alone, Alex smiled a little and quickly calmed down, wondering why he had been so grumpy with his friends. The lads meant no harm nor any disrespect to Marina, and God knows, he thought, after what they had all been through over the past few weeks, they needed a little merriment. They had had to live much like animals during their furtive journey across England to the border, their failure to rescue Queen Mary like bitter aloes on their tongues, sorrow for the loss of their comrades crushing spirits already low because of the abortive mission.

Alexander sighed. He had been churlish to the lads and now regretted it. He, unlike the rest, had Marina to distract him from his troubles. The girl had firmly attached herself to him, and doubtless the rest felt excluded. Though she was pleasant to them and laughed at their antics and attempts to forget their disappointments in jesting, Marina also perhaps unconsciously had made it clear that it was Alexander Sinclair who had captured her interest.

Alex threw his arms behind his head and stretched. When he considered it, Marina had been the only bright spot of the last few months; at least they'd had success in getting her away from her abusive husband. Her relief and gratitude too had been heartening. It helped to ease the sadness and depression in his heart. What a girl! Alex mused, smiling in the darkness. He had never known a woman so open in regard to her feelings before. What had been behind her invitation tonight? he wondered. There had been a moment when he had been tempted to accept and follow her into her room.

He was drifting off to sleep when he heard shouting and commotion below his window. Springing up, Alex

peered through the glass, but his view of the courtyard was obstructed by a tree. Amid the raised voices coming from the entrance to the inn he detected one that was unmistakably English.

Alex jumped out of bed and ran to his clothes and pulled on his breeches, unsheathed his sword, and hurried to the door. Phantomlike, he moved out into the corridor and headed for the stairs, wondering if Edgar Stafford could have followed them here. Now he wished that they had gone deeper into Scotland before stopping for the night, but Marina had been so exhausted, her bones sore from the long ride and from the thrashings her swine of a husband had given her.

At the top of the stairs he paused and peered down. The foyer was packed with angry, muttering people, some waving their fists at the door. Tybold, the innkeeper, a massive man with a bald head that gleamed in the candlelight, bellowed, "Begone with you! We want nae trouble here."

Wary and alert, Alex descended the stairs with his sword in his hand, his strapping, well-muscled body, naked from the waist up, drew quick admiring glances from the few women in the foyer and looks of envy from the men. He was tall enough to see over the heads of those

who stood between him and the entrance. Three men were struggling with the sentries always stationed there to keep out the rabble, but because of the hoods they were wearing Alex couldn't see their faces. One of them cried, "This be a public inn and we've good coin to pay for our ale, so you cannot stop us from entering."

Tybold whipped a pistol out of his belt and shoved his way to the front, warning, "Leave while ye can, for by God, ye'll fleece no more of my customers. I'll blast yer heads off first."

The three intruders stopped struggling and glanced up in alarm. None of them was Edgar Stafford. Alex relaxed and lowered his sword. "Who are these people?" he asked the innkeeper.

Tybold scowled and glanced at him briefly while keeping his pistol trained on the entrance. "English scum from across the border. Mind you," he was quick to add for the benefit of the Southerners then in the inn, "I've nothing agin the English. Most mind their manners. But this pack"he waved to the door with his free hand"slink in here to dice with my customers and trick them out of their purses, then slip away ower the border wi' their ill-begotten profits. 'Twill not happen again!"

With that he fired a shot over their heads, and, misliking their rough welcome, the three Englishmen turned and bolted away into the darkness to find their mounts, realizing that the game was up. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief and filed back into the inn or upstairs to bed. Alex turned to find most of his friends standing behind him on the stairs, all armed. "Me-thought it might be Stafford," said Robert Douglas, "when the English voices rang out. The lass will be sore afraid if she heard."

When his friends returned to their chambers, Alex walked outside and looked around. All was quiet now, the night frosty and bitter cold, especially against his bare skin. Eager to crawl back into the warmth of his bed, Alex bounded up the stairs and was passing Marina's door when it opened a crack and he caught a glimpse of a white face peering out from the darkness inside. She had some sort of cover clutched around her.

"Alex . . . ?" Marina's voice was thin, shaking with fear. "W-what happened?"

He hesitated for a moment; then, afraid of causing more disturbance for those anxious to get to sleep in the nearby rooms, he pushed open

her door and stepped into her chamber. Neither quite knew how it happened, but the next instant Marina was in his arms.

5

Alex kicked the door closed and carried her to the bed. Marina felt astonishingly light and fragile in his arms and she was trembling so much he was afraid she would shatter. The chamber was dark and very chilly. Soothing her, assuring her that she had nothing to fear, Alex lowered her onto the bed and lay down beside her, pulling the covers up around both of them.

" 'Twas only some rabble come to the inn from over the border," he explained. "Be at ease, they've gone now."

She moved closer to him. "I thought Edgar"

"Nay, nay." In the darkness he reached out and brushed the rumpled blonde hair back from her face. "He will never be able to find us here."

Marina shivered against him and his hand fell from her hair to her bare shoulder. "You are cold," Alex remarked, voice low. He put his arm around her and

drew her against him. "There! We can warm each other up."

"Don't leave me!" she begged, chilled to the marrow, more from fear than the rawness of the room. When she had wakened to hear English voices shouting below, Marina had been certain that Edgar had come to force her back to Baxton Hall, perhaps with a large contingent of his friends and neighbors to back him up, from all the racket going on in the foyer. Oh, the relief to find that she had been mistaken! The sheer joy to see Alex at her door, hale and hearty! Now, snuggling against him, her cheek pressed to his bare chest, his muscular arm holding her tight to the length of his strong young body, she offered up a quick prayer of thankfulness that she had been delivered from abject misery once again. No one had ever been as good to her as Alexander Sinclair, nor as sweet and kind, as understanding. Marina knew already that he was a special kind of man, far above the average. Not only was he outstanding in character, but in looks as well. She felt strongly that Sinclair was the nearest thing to a god that she would ever encounter in her life.

For a few minutes both were silent as they clung to each other for

warmth. Soothingly Alex stroked her face, her neck, the silken curve of her shoulder, liking the clean, fresh scent of her, the softness of her cloud of pale gold hair under his fingers and upon his chest. When he changed position slightly, the sheet about her slipped and a jolt went through him when her breast brushed his side. He felt as if he had been burned. Instantly it was as if a blazing fire had ignited inside him, and he caught his breath. It had been months since he had made love to a woman. Desire surged through him in a hot, throbbing wave, and his

manhood was achingly rigid.

Marina raised her head slightly when she felt him tense.

"Alex . . . is anything wrong?"

He didn't answer, couldn't answer, afraid his voice would betray the lust he felt, hot and urgent and demanding appeasement. Sweat burst out on him as he sought to control his need, his loins paining him now, skin burning. Suddenly he sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed, muttering hoarsely, "I must go . . ."

Alarmed, fearing that he had taken ill, Marina clutched his arm. "What ails you, my lord? Light the candle. Let me look at you"

"Nay!" His voice was rough and harsh, so unlike him, but Alex cringed at the thought of her seeing the turgid evidence of his lust. "I should not have come into this chamber."

"Why . . . not?" Marina was terribly hurt and confused at his abrupt change of attitude, from tenderness one moment to cold rejection the next. Tears rose in her eyes as she asked him, "What have I done? *Why* shouldn't you have come here?"

Hearing the catch in her voice, Alex hesitated. The next moment he was leaning over her, muttering hoarsely, "I shall show you why not . . ."

Suddenly he crushed his mouth to hers and kissed her passionately, hungrily, while impatiently throwing the bed covers aside to expose her nakedness. Marina tensed with shock as his hot hands shuddered down the length of her body, cupping her firm young breasts, squeezing her hips, his fingersthen his mouthon her nipples, her stomach, her legs. "Marina," he breathed. "Sweet Marina . . ."

She froze. Edgar Stafford and his vile lust welled up in her mind, his dirty nails raking her flesh, cruel

hands pulling her hair, raining blow after blow on her when she resisted his loathsome instructions. Bed sporthow she hated it! "Nay!" she cried aloud. "Nay, don't hurt me!"

Alex raised his head. "Hurt you? Do you think I ever would? I will show youshow you what love means."

Restraining himself, Alex kissed her deeply, yet tenderly, then pressed his mouth lightly to each spot on her face where her skin had been bruised, then to her eyes, her ears, the corners of her mouth, and her throat where he could feel a pulse beating in agitation. He raised his head and smiled at her in the darkness. "You like me a little?"

"Aye, of course, but"

"I can bring you joy, ecstasy, feelings that you've never known before. 'Tis pleasure I want to give you, Marina," he went on in a deep, hypnotic voice, "not pain. Such sweet pleasure . . ."

Alex kissed her again, his mouth moving ravenously on hers, his fingers flowing through her hair, his warm hand over her body, and after a moment Marina's tension began to ebb, her fear to slip away. An odd languorous feeling stole over her. She felt pleasantly relaxed, cherished. This was a world away from the brutality that Stafford had subjected her to. It was almost . . . pleasant. Her head began to swim, her thoughts to spin away as Alex continued to stroke her, his hand gradually becoming more probing, lingering on her breast, fingers tugging gently on her nipples, making them leap up eager and taut. Then his fingers moved lightly over her belly, and down to the dark place between her legs. She felt a rush of heat in her face. Sense came back.

Marina sucked in her breath and clutched at his hand. "N-nay . . . you must not . . ."

"Why not? Don't you like it?" His voice seemed oddly far away.

Her face was burning. "Aye, but"

"Then what's the harm?"

Alex bent his head to her breast, his tongue slowly circling the nipple, licking her, stroking, flicking the stiff little nub, drawing it hungrily into his mouth. His burning hand moved firmly between her legs and his fingers sought and found her moistness. The firm tugging at her breast, the rhythmic motion of his fingers, made Marina gasp with intense pleasure and cry aloud as a piercing thrill raced through her veins. In a dim way she realized that Alex was right. This was ecstasy such as she had never imagined. It mesmerized her and sapped her strength to push him away. Instead, hardly aware of what she was doing, her hands rose fluttering to his muscular shoulders, the skin dewy and warm. She plunged her fingers into his curling black hair, felt the smooth tawny skin of his broad back, caught his face between her hands and brought his mouth to hers, moaning, "Oh, Alex, kiss me! II" But Marina could not express what she craved at that moment, except that her whole body felt as if it were on fire, her senses clamoring, urgently demanding more, more.

Now he plundered her mouth, all restraint gone, then moved away just long enough to wrench off his breeches. He lowered the full length of his body over hers and pressed down until Marina felt the rocklike imprint of his manhood hard against her. Alex was a lusty young animal and he could tell now that the girl was as eager as he was. All his sensual instincts were fully aroused; he was burning with desire. Lifting her legs, he impatiently got between them, leaned forward, and claimed her lips in a passionate kiss, then

with a groan of release, bore down.

When Marina gave a sharp little cry he felt a vague surprise, but he was too consumed with need to pay much attention. He *did* notice that she was very tight, though the friction only increased his rapture. Powerfully, with all the youthful vigor surging through his body, he rose and fell above her. After the first stab of pain, the first soreness, Marina automatically moved to keep pace with his rhythm, and a flicker, then a burst of tingling fire swept through her body and she was drowned in a turbulent sea of intense sensation such as she had never dreamed possible. Shuddering, moaning, Marina surged against him, desperate to make the feeling last. A steamy heat enveloped both of them as they finally collapsed on the bed, locked tight in each other's arms.

For a moment or two, as they struggled for breath, neither spoke. Then Alex turned to her in the darkness and chuckled, "Well, was that better than Stafford?"

Better than Stafford! All Edgar had brought her was pain, and thankfully he had never once been able to penetrate her. Now, shattered by her blissful experience, and wanting nothing more than to lie in silence and contemplate it, and its effect on her, Marina was dismayed to hear Sinclair mention her husband's name. Edgar was the last person she wanted to be reminded of at that special moment. Thinking of him spoiled everything. It also reminded Marina that she was married; that what had just taken place with Alex had been wrong, sinful.

"Well?" he said.

Marina burst into tears.

Alex was startled. True, a virgin sometimes wept after her first physical coupling with a man, but not a married woman. "You are not sorry?" Raising himself

on an elbow, he gazed down at her in consternation, for she had certainly *seemed* willing enough. "Surely you are not concerned about betraying Stafford? The swine doesn't deserve your loyalty."

"Nay, but"

"But what?" He sounded a little angry. Alex had thoroughly enjoy Marina and had tried to please her too. Hungry as he had been, he had managed to hold himself back until he knew she was fully aroused and ready. He found her tears insulting, a slight to his manhood. "What ails you?" he pressed.

"N-nothing . . ." There was no way that Marina could express her jumbled feelings, joy and happiness mingled with something like shame, even though, as Alex had said, Edgar didn't deserve her fidelity and it was Sinclair whom she loved. But still . . . it was wrong.

Alex got up and lit the candle, frowning when Marina's tearful face was revealed to him in the flickering yellow light, a light that emphasized the swelling and discoloration of her features. It was far from kind to her; she looked most uncomely. Staring down at Marina, Alex wondered how in the name of God he could have made love to such a plain woman. He was angry, hurt by her response, and in no mood to be charitable.

He gave a start when he saw the red spots on the rumpled sheets. For a second his eyes widened, incredulous, then his gaze jumped to

Marina's thighs and he saw more of the same there. Blood or what looked like blood!

She wrenched up the covers and turned her head away, embarrassed.

"What's this?" he demanded, pointing at the bed. Alex couldn't believe his eyes. She was a married

woman! Oh, there was something very odd about this; something that smacked of trickery. If Marina thought to splash something on the sheets to trap him in some way

He grasped the covers and whipped them off the bed, examined the marks there, then regarded her grimly. "Where is it? Show me the stuff you put there?"

Marina didn't know what he was talking about but she was chilled at the cold expression on his face, one that transformed him from the friendly young man she had fallen in love with into a haughty, arrogant stranger. "Whatwhat do you mean?" she stammered.

A fine show of innocence! he thought angrily. It was a common enough trick, and he should have been more alert for it. There was always that danger when a nobleman lay with a woman below his rank, the ever-present threat of entrapment. A woman's virginity was a highly prized thing, and many were the aristocrats who had had to pay dearly for that which they had never taken. His own cousin Jay Sinclair was one of them. The whore he had bedded had ended up by destroying Jay's marriage and continued to be a constant drain on his purse.

Alex held out his hand imperiously. "I would have the potion you spattered on the bed, mistress."

"Potion?"

"What was it?" His lip curled contemptuously. "Ox blood, cochineal liquid, wine? Mayhap you saved some of the Madeira from supper, eh?" he suggested sarcastically.

Marina flushed scarlet. "I was a virgin."

He burst out laughing, hard, scornful laughter. "And *I* am the King of Scotland! You are a married

woman," he all but shouted at her, "and you told me yourself that that husband of yours was desperate for young. Do you take me for a fool?"

" 'Tis true, I swear I was a virgin."

"Pah! What man would marry a woman and be content just to gaze at her? Yours, by the looks of him, was a rutting old goat."

Alex proceeded to search the room while Marina watched him fearfully, but he found nothing that would incriminate the girl. That didn't exonerate her. The bloods such women were wont to dowas often contained in a little pouch of cow gut, and once it was surreptitiously splashed on the bed, these women often swallowed the receptacle. Their tricks were many and varied, but it all boiled down to one thing, an attempt to sink their hooks into a man of wealth and position, trapping him into supporting them and their bastard children.

Finally Alex returned to the bed.

"There was no need for this," he said with a wave to the sheets. "I would have given you money. I always pay for what I receive."

Fresh tears surged up and spilled over onto Marina's pale cheeks, and all her beautiful illusions came crashing down. She was frightened too. Sinclair looked furious enough to strike her. He thought she had tried to trick him, she realized, but why would she play false with a man who had risked his life to take her out of Baxton Hall; who had been kind and considerate, even tender? That man, she saw, had vanished. The god had tumbled from his high place. Now another side of Sinclair had come to the fore, a darker side, and it chilled her. For him to all but call her a whore!

"I don't want your money, sir," Marina told him

stiffly, a glint of anger in her eyes. She burst out hotly, "I would rather sweep and scrub and wash tables at an inn such as this than stoop to living off men."

"Indeed?" His lip curled.

Greatly offended that Alex would be so quick to think the worst of her, she explained coldly, "Edgar Stafford was no true man. He had been wounded in battle long ago, and"heat rose in her face"he was incapable of performing his husbandly duties. Doubtless that was what

made him so frustrated and vicious."

"I have only your word for that."

She lifted her head, insulted, and didn't bother to reply.

Alex looked at her battered face, and the marks of Stafford's brutality seemed to flare at him. Was it possible? he mused. Could this be the work of a man driven to madness by his disability, one who took out his own inadequacy on the person closest to him, as many another had done before him?

He felt himself wavering. Marina was a lady. There was no disputing that. Until he saw the blood he would never have dreamed her capable of stooping so low; perhaps he had been hasty. He could see that she felt highly affronted, and if he had misjudged her he had certainly done her a great wrong. But she was a married woman, and Stafford, though far from young, had looked remarkably fit to him.

Alex began to pull on his clothes, sorry at the way things had turned out, but men in his position were ever prey for scheming women and he had to be careful. Even his friends had been surprised at how readily Marina had been willing to go with them. Then, Alex recalled, it had only been *after* they left Baxton Hall that she'd thought to inform them that

she had no one to take her in, thus leaving them with no option but to bring her with them into Scotland. Now he was responsible for her responsibility thrust upon him. Irritably Alex yanked on his boots and straightened up.

Marina sat huddled in bed with the covers drawn up to her chin. In spite of everything, she looked touchingly helpless and appealing, like a lost child.

"What are you going to do?" she asked nervously, all too aware of the fact that without Sinclair's protection she would be in a precarious position indeed.

He hesitated, then sighed, "I am going to do exactly as I promised and take you to Ayrshire." He eyed her curiously. "*If* you still wish to go?"

She had no choice! "I would not want to be a burden to you."

A strange little smile touched his lips. "Then it is settled." He strode to

the door and there turned to say, "We leave here at seven of the clock on the morrow. Be ready."

Marina nodded, her heart full, eyes overflowing. When he left the room she got up and locked the door and returned to bed and blew out the candle. Throwing herself face down on the blankets, she wept.

It was as if she had painted a beautiful picture and someone had taken the brush and darkened the bright scene she had created so that it wasn't so perfect and dazzling anymore, yet still the same picture. It struck her now that she had made too many grand assumptions about Alexander Sinclair as he had once told her himself! Marina recalled him telling her the previous night, "I am no better or worse than the average fellow, worse, some might say." And she had not believed him. Fool! she thought. Fool!

He had taken her virginity, then accused her of trying to trick him, and bad enough as that had been,

had insulted her by offering to pay for her services. How could a man who behaved so chivalrously one moment turn right around and act like such a cad the next? Oh, she didn't understand him at all. But at least she knew now that Alexander Sinclair was not perfect. From now on she would be on her guard.

6

Edgar Stafford stood in the hall of Chiltern Castle and shouted abuse at the Percys.

He had spent all the previous day searching the countryside for his runaway wife and, failing to find her, came to the obvious conclusion none he didn't want to believe she had escaped over the border into Scotland with Lord Alexander Sinclair! He remembered that this girl, whom he had deigned to marry when Nevil Dacre refused, had come to the attention of Francis Walsingham for making serious allegations against the Queen of England. He recalled to how this man Sinclair had plotted and attempted to free the Queen of Scots, and a connection between these two things was made in his mind. Stafford, for all his miserliness, was a man of great pride, one whom people admired for his valor in battle and, in Northumberland at least, for his unflagging devotion to the Catholic religion. Failure in any form was

intolerable to this proud man, particularly his inability to beget a son which he felt certain he could have done with Marina Dudley.

"What of this woman you wed me to?" Edgar roared at the Percys. "Methinks there was much about her that was kept from me."

Sir Guy and Lady Maud exchanged nervous glances, but Percy responded coldly, "Nonsense, Stafford! You know as well as I that she was but an innocent, untried girl"

"Innocent!" the other roared, spittle flying from his mouth. "Nay, there is nothing innocent about that one! Did she not make treasonable claims about the Queen's grace? Did she not fall under the suspicion of Sir Francis Walsingham? And did I not deign, risking my reputation, to marry this wench when none other would have her?" He thrust his head forward, boarlike, and shouted, "You lied to me about Marina Dudley, Sir Percy! You told me that her dangerous claim to the Spaniard was but an unfortunate jest"

"That it was."

"Nay." Stafford shook his head emphatically, his small eyes darting from the knight to his wife, both of whom stood before the great hall fire trying to keep their expressions unfathomable. "Nay, in light of her flight with Sinclair, what went before takes on a more serious implication. Forget not that this man tried to free the Queen of Scots and set her on Elizabeth's throne. Why, even a dullard could see the connection!" He struggled for breath. "I smell collusion in this," he said ominously, "and methinks you, Percy, are behind it."

Real alarm flickered in Sir Guy's eyes, though he remained remarkably calm. He reminded the furious, vindictive Stafford, "Sir, we care not for the Protestants in these parts." With a glance around the hall, he

went on in a lower tone, "You as well as any, mayhap more so, would gladly see a Catholic on the throne." When the older man compressed his lips and neither agreed nor denied it, Percy said, "Come, Edgar, the crux of the matter is not politics but an errant wife, and we are sorry for that"

"Sorry!" All Stafford's rage and indignation came bounding back. "Aye, and *she* will be sorry when I find her!" He could have added, "She is mine, and what is mine never escapes my hands." Instead, he ranted, "You told me she had been raised to obey, but the wench denied me my rights from the first, fighting me like aa she-cat when I would

claim what was due me. Now," he choked, his eyes bulging, "I shall be the laughing stock of the county! Where, people will ask, is Stafford's young wife? And where is the child he swore to put in her belly? How can I hold up my head when there is no wife, no child to be seen at Baxton Hall?" He jabbed a finger at Sir Guy's bland face, crying, "I hold you, my lord Percy, responsible for this pass I've come to in my gray years."

Maud Percy bristled with anger. To be upbraided like this by a common, mean-hearted churl, aye, and in their own home too! She had never liked Stafford and his coarse, ungallant ways with no social graces about him. Further, she knew very well that the fellow thought little of her, perhaps having heard, when his former wives departed the scene so mysteriously, that she had discussed the matter at length with her friends and relatives, and suggested that there should be an inquiry.

Lady Maud now spoke for the first time since Stafford had barged into their hall, and it proved to be an unfortunate remark indeed. She said silkily, "Marry, but it seems you have bad luck with these wives of yours, Stafford, though in truth I have never heard of a

wife running away when she was well treated by her lord."

The vengeful little eyes swung in her direction, even as Sir Guy shot his wife a glance of stark dismay. Better to let the betrayed husband rant and rave and get it off his chest, to his mind, than to say something bound to provoke his ire still further. Ah, but Maud had never known when to hold her tongue!

Edgar stepped up to the lady and stared grimly into her face, and this time his voice was controlled, therefore all the more deadly when he said, "Lady Percy, I detect accusation in that remark, but it seems to me, knowing you as I do, that you have no right to criticize anyone." He cocked his head to the side, studying her, and went on in the same low, ominous tone, "If I remember aright 'twas you, in begone years, who brought Marina Dudley back with you from your own, ah"mocking now"long sojourn in London. It also strikes me, lady, that you know much more about this girl than you care to tell"

"Stafford!" Sir Guy growled a warning. It was one thing for *him* to be angry at his wife's acid and ready tongue but quite another for Edgar Stafford to make slighting hints about her character. He glowered at the older man and asked curtly, "Was the marriage consummated?" He

continued craftily, fully cognizant of Stafford's personal problem, also his grasping ways, "For if not, it can be annulled and Marina's dowry returned to us."

Stafford's grizzled head jerked from Lady Maud to her husband, and his eyes narrowed to slits. Ah . . . he thought, here one must tread warily. All his acquisitive instincts were aroused and he temporarily forgot about his missing wife when faced with the potential loss of her modest fortune, a dowry that he was determined would never be wrested from his grasp.

But Edgar Stafford was a deeply religious man, in his own way, of course, and an essentially honest man for all his other failings.

He replied cryptically, letting them make of it what they would, "There can be no annulment of this marriage."

Percy raised both hands in a gesture of helplessness. Having offered Stafford a way out, he made it clear that he had done all he could.

"It will not end here," the older man threatened, and with a signal to his squire, who had heard everything, he strode angrily out of Chiltern Castle.

Once alone in their privy chamber, Sir Guy railed at his wife. She was a gossip and a troublemaker, he shouted at her, a lazy woman good for nothing but stirring up strife and intrigue. She had no subtlety, no brains. "Dost not realize that this is serious?" he roared into her face. "Edgar Stafford can be dangerous, the more so when he loses something that belonged to him."

"Bah! Why should *we* fear the likes of him?" Maud retorted scornfully, "He's a man in his dotage and of no consequence."

"There you are wrong!" he snapped. "He's far from doddering yet. And even if *you* think little of him, there are some in this county who respect the fellow and will sympathize with him in his present predicament. They will remember that he was courageous enough to wed himself to a wife who had come to the notice of Walsingham's wife who ran away with a Scot who had plotted against the Crown!" Breathing hard, his eyes alive with anger and alarm, he cried, "What, think you, will they make of this? And Marina, that young baggage, having come to the marriage from this house!"

The haughty arrogance vanished from Maud

Percy's face. She turned away from her worried husband and walked to the window, a plump, once pretty woman of fifty-two who, in spite of her past indiscretion with another man, had given this one six robust children, three of them lusty sons, and by so doing had made up for that lapses she thought and firmly established her position as Lady of Chiltern Castle.

Maud Percy, formerly Dudley, had grown up in a rambling house in Kent within an easy ride of London. She had been one of ten children, her family prominent and ambitious, and as a young girl had spent two heady years at court. Then her father had wed her to Guy Percy who lived in faraway Northumberland, a man with no aspirations of glory whatsoever, one who was content with the rustic society to be found in his northern county when he wasn't busy managing his large estate. He had been a handsome, prosperous young man with an easygoing disposition in the early years, and Maud who had longed for a brilliant marriage had been slightly mollified by that, but from the start of their marriage she had sorely missed all the excitement, amusements, the color and, yes, the constant intrigue to be found in London. Whenever she could, she returned there for visits, and it had been during one of those visits that she had met the other man.

With her back to Percy she said quietly, "Stafford would not dare make trouble, considering the mischief he himself has perpetrated against the Protestants hereabouts."

"None of which ever came to Walsingham's attention," Percy snapped. "The same cannot be said for Mistress Marina!"

She shrugged. "Nor would Walsingham have bothered about that if it hadn't been for this grave decision about to be made concerning the Queen of Scotland,

when he mistrusts any slight again Elizabeth's character. If that Spaniard hadn't gone to London and spread his lies"

"But he did, you twit!" stormed Percy. "Think how the Queen's ministers would have taken that. For such a claim to be bruited about at just this time would have struck them as being ominous. Who, they would be bound to wonder, had put the girl up to it? They would ask themselves, 'Can there be rebellion brewing once again in the North? And who is behind that rebellion? Can we risk a Catholic uprising at the moment when Mary Stuart's death warrant is about to be signed? Nay, we most certainly cannot!' " Percy glared at his wife's stout back.

"I can well imagine my lord Walsingham saying, 'We must look into the matter posthaste, Your Majesty, for we dare not disregard it, no matter how outrageous and ridiculous it may seem. This girl has announced before a large assembly that she is your daughter, an announcement that smacks of treason. I must send agents North to examine the people responsible.' "

Now Lady Maud was frightened, but she blustered, "Edgar Stafford hates the Protestants and would do naught to help their cause. Was that not why he offered hospitality to the Scotsman Sinclair, because he had tried to free Mary and bring down the Protestant regime?" She laughed shakily. "When have you ever known Stafford to offer hospitality to anyone, miserly cur that he is? But he put his hall at the disposal of this Scottish nobleman because he admired his daring deed. Nay, we have nothing to worry about from Stafford. He has Marina's dowry, forget not, and that alone will appease him. Marina herself he will forget soon enough."

Marina, Marina! The very sound of that name was enough to send the blood rushing to Percy's head.

When he thought of all the trouble that girl had caused them! Irritable and worried, he threw himself down fully clothed on the bed and mulled over the latest development, heartily wishing that he had never agreed to become the girl's guardian in the first place. His mind went back thirteen years or so to the time Maud had returned to Chiltern Castle after paying a visit to her family in Kent. She had brought Marina, a babe then, back with her.

Maud had had a sad story to relate. Her cousin Walter and his Danish wife had both perished in a smallpox epidemic, she told her husband, leaving their poor little child an orphan. Sir Guy had never met Cousin Walter, nor indeed many of his wife's countless relatives, simply because he had never had any desire to travel South, nor they any interest in coming North. He had been surprised when Maud begged him to become the girl's guardian, saying, "I have taken a fancy to her, Guy. There is something about her that appeals to me, and no one else in my family seemed much concerned about her."

It had occurred to Percy to wonder if Marina could have been Maud's own daughter, the result of her liaison with the man who had almost broken up their marriage less than three years before. Once he and Maud had reconciled, they had agreed never to discuss this affair, both vowing to put it out of their minds and pretend it had never

happened. So . . . Sir Guy had generously consented to be Marina's guardian this after his lady let it be known that there was a fair sum of money involved, with a goodly portion of it going to them and the rest to be set aside for Marina's future dowry. The money, Percy felt certain, was the *real* reason the child had so "appealed" to his wife, a woman not overfond of children.

So Marina Dudley had become his ward. But often through the years Sir Guy had found himself wondering if the story Lady Maud had told him had been true if Marina really *was* the daughter of Walter Dudley and his Danish wife, or his own wife's bastard!

Once, slightly drunk, he had challenged Maud with his suspicions. She had taken a kind of fit, screaming, "You gave me your word never to talk about that again! Now you've broken your word, and my heart with it! Nay, the girl is not mine!" Then she had swooned and taken to her bed for a month afterwards, to the great alarm of their own children, who had loudly blamed him for threatening the health of their mother.

He never referred to it again.

But neither did Percy stop wondering. Now, with a glance at Maud's buxom figure standing at the window, he said in a quieter tone, "You did wrong to antagonize Stafford."

"Mayhap I erred in that," she nodded. "But I mislike the fellow heartily!"

"What of this pothor with the Scottish nobleman?"

She snorted, "If he *is* who he says he is, which I doubt, then he is welcome to the little firebrand. I vow his heart will be roasted with her as ours was and he will not entertain her long. Then where will she be with no husband and no dowry?"

They rode through the rugged Galloway Hills, bone weary now and blind to the grandeur of nature around them, the snowy hillsides, frigid blue lakes and streams, the haunting solitude of the terrain. They had ridden in silence for a long time, and a kind of melancholy had settled over Sinclair and his friends since with each step they took closer to home the

further they left their fallen comrades behind. Alex brooded about

Jamie Fraser, the lad who had been taken alive. In some ways Jamie's fate would be worse if he reached London alive to undergo the rigors of interrogation when Walsingham's agents would try to force the names of his fellow conspirators out of him, employing bestial methods to do it. If Fraser lived to talk and could one really blame a man for talking when trapped in the rat pit with the creatures vigorously gnawing at his bones, or spread out on the rack with his limbs being torn asunder? then Elizabeth and her secret police would have their names. They were safe enough in Scotland, Alex felt. Though King James made an effort to please his English cousin, his eye to inheriting her crown, he could hardly punish those who had tried to save his own mother. For one thing, the people of Scotland, already outraged at what was happening to their former Queen, would never allow it.

Finding himself in a doleful mood, sad at the loss of his friends, Alex glanced at Marina. She'd had a way about her of cheering him, of distracting him from his woes. But he found the girl slumped wearily over the back of her horse, her eyes fixed stoically ahead, looking as glum as he felt himself. She had been very quiet and distant since they left the Four Doves, and the others had noticed, though they'd made no comment. Alex knew that he was to blame for her changed mood. Until the night he had accused her of trying to trick him, Marina had been bubbling over with happiness and made no secret of it at getting safely away from Baxton Hall. The change in her demeanor was so pronounced that it made Sinclair feel uncomfortable but he'd had good reason to challenge her! A virgin, eh? he mused, still cynical at the idea.

Yet he sorely missed her former warmth and her unabashed admiration for him, even while realizing that he didn't deserve it. He knew all too well that he wasn't the saint she had at first made him out to be. Nor had he tried to deceive her into thinking he was.

Alex moved his horse close to her. " 'Twill not be long now," he told her. "You must be very fatigued."

Marina nodded, but she didn't look at him.

Alex leaned forward in the saddle the better to see her face, half-hidden from him by the hood she was wearing. Her eyes were riveted directly ahead to avoid meeting his, and her expression was sober.

"I see you are annoyed with me," he commented.

"Nay, just saddened."

"Come, Marina, there's no point in sulking. We can at least be civil to each other." When she didn't respond he went on, hoping to catch her interest, "Are you not curious to hear about where you'll be living?" At her slight nod he was encouraged, and launched into a glowing description of Ayrshire. " 'Tis a bonny county by the sea, and methinks you will like Cairnmore House. It has pretty gardens and woodland trails aplenty to walk in, and a fine beach, good oak woods, with some of the best hunting and fishing in the country."

When Marina made no comment he plowed on, "Sir Ralph Cairnmore, my grandsire, is a kindly man much given to laughter and gaiety." Or at least he had been. Alex hadn't seen Sir Ralph for the past two years. "I think he will make you most welcome," he finished, and waited for her response.

"You are very kind," Marina replied woodenly.

Alex inhaled deeply, striving for patience. He cast about for some way to rouse her out of her dolor, which was making him even more depressed than he already was. With a glance at the gear she was

wearing, all the dead Hamilton's clothes, he had a burst of inspiration. "Once we arrive we must find a seamstress to make you a pretty new gown or two."

Her reaction was unexpected; most women relished new clothes. But with a cool sidelong glance at him, Marina said tightly, "I'll find work and pay for them myself."

He flushed, and threw a look around at his friends, who hastily turned away though he could tell they'd been listening.

He frowned at her stubborn face, muttering, "Until then you cannot go naked. And a lady doesn't work for a living, so be reasonable."

Marina lifted her head and steered her horse away from his, making it clear that she wasn't interested in his company, and Alexander's face tightened angrily. He said no more. He had given his friends enough free entertainment. Alex could tell that they were puzzled as they observed his relationship with Marina unfold. She could hardly be called a beauty. As he'd overheard Keith Seton say to one of the others, "The lass is as plain as rye bread." Further, she was married, with neither name, dowry, nor high connections to recommend her.

But what did any of that matter to him? It wasn't as if he were considering marrying the girl even were she free to marry. All he sought from her was pleasant company, surely not too much to ask.

Irritated, Alex spurred up his horse and galloped on ahead of the party.

Marina watched him go. Aye, she thought, he is annoyed with me. He thinks all he has to do is turn on that potent charm and I will succumb, much as I did before. Oh, but she had learned a harsh lesson since then! Now she wasn't so gullible, so easily taken in.

Since leaving the Four Doves, Marina had had ample time to take stock of her situation. It was

daunting, now that the rosy veil had been whipped off her foolish eyes. In her desperation to leave Stafford she had run away with the first man who came along, had, in essence, put all her hope and trust in the hands of a total stranger. He had seemed like the most gallant cavalier, almost like a god to her as he described how he'd tried to rescue a Queen; Alexander Sinclair had dazzled her, blinded her with his handsomeness and charm. So . . . she had gone with him, only to discover later that Alexander wasn't quite the flawless idol that she had imagined him to be.

It had come as a crushing blow, but on reflection, Marina concluded that perhaps she had expected too much of him. There was still quite a lot to admire in Alexander. She had to be fair. Anyway, here she was in a foreign country with a man she was only truly beginning to know, dependent on him in every way. She was grateful to Alex and had every reason to be, but he must be made to realize that she was a woman who demanded respect, aye, even if she was from a lower station in life than himself.

Finally they smelled the sea.

Exhausted as they were from their long ride, it was as if an electrical charge jolted through the men; even their drooping mounts leaped forward. On a high plateau, a body of land that Marina came to know later as the Heads of Ayr, she was thrilled out of her black mood by the stunning picture laid out before her.

There below was the aquamarine glitter of the sea sweeping away to a misty horizon with the stately grandeur of the Arran Hills rising out of the water eighteen miles from land, deep purple and capped with

snow. Beneath them were tiny villages and hamlets snuggled for protection against the cliffs that

ended at the water's edge, with a picturesque harbor where fishing vessels bobbed at anchor. On a lofty promontory a castle rose proudly, black against the frosty blue of the sky, a fairy-tale setting as if cut from a picture book.

Exhilarated by the beauty of her surroundings, Marina inhaled deeply, the clean, salty air swelling her lungs and instantly clearing the dizziness of fatigue out of her head. She turned to find Alex watching her.

"Well, does it please you?" he inquired.

" 'Tis the most beautiful view I have ever seen."

He was glad that there was *something* to her liking! Smilingoblivious to the effect of that flashing white smile on the girl watching himhe pointed to the headland. "That castle yonder is Danure, home of the Kennedys, and the village below bears the same name. Mary Stuart stopped there briefly on her flight to England for help almost nineteen years ago." His face darkened as he added, " 'Tis a pity she ever left it!"

Marina glanced around. "Is Cairnmore House nearby?" She assumed, since Sinclair was going there, that he shared the premises with his grandfather.

He nodded. "Follow me," and led the way downhill.

Marina was suddenly nervous at the thought of meeting Sir Ralph Cairnmore. Though Scotland and England were at peace, there were still many in both places who hated and were distrustful of the other. She worried about the sort of reception she would get. She was English, a runaway wife, and from a lower station in life than Sinclair. Alex's grandfather might blame her for involving him in her escape, which was a criminal offense. He would be bound to wonder what the young nobleman was doing with a married English woman of inferior rank to himself.

Marina fretted about that for a few minutes as they rode along, then hurried ahead and caught up with

Alex. "My lord, what shall we tell Sir Ralph?" she asked anxiously.

"He . . . he might not understand."

He knew what she was thinking; a misgiving or two had crossed his own mind. But Sir Ralph had always been an easygoing fellow who never meddled in the affairs of others. Alex had always had a good relationship with the older man, and besides, other arrangements would have to be made if Cairnmore refused to shelter the lass though he hoped that wouldn't be the case. "You have nothing to worry about," he said. "I know my grandfather."

His eyes flickered over her and he noticed that her bruises were fading more each day; with a reduction of the swelling her features were changing from lumpiness to near-delicacy. In the bright light her lustrous blonde hair shone and her eyes sparkled, her long curling lashes casting shadows on her cheeks. The girl was far from plain! Alex, glancing at her, glimpsed, as through a veil, the promise of beauty.

It struck him that soon they would be parting company, perhaps for a long time, and he realized that the thought didn't please him. Not at all! He liked Marina. Searching his soul, he realized that it went a little deeper than that. He was attracted to the girl, a fact that his friends would find surprising, but no one was more surprised than himself. Why Marina Stafford? Why indeed?

They rode through a grove of birch and oak trees and there, in a sheltered dell, sat Cairnmore House. It was a pleasant, though not grand, residence of medium size, built of solid sandstone, its warm pinkish-red color contrasting with the light covering of snow on the ground.

Alex turned in the saddle and gave Marina a long, measuring look as if trying to puzzle something out. She was caught by the grave expression on his face and

wondered what he was thinking. *She* was thinking that he looked good in the saddle; that he handled his high-spirited horse well. But then he did most things well, Marina mused with a little inward shiver that brought a rush of pink to her cheeks. He had the body of a beautiful male animal, black hair that shone like jet, and vibrant green eyes that mirrored his zest for living. Confident and commanding, active and strong and with virility in every line of his body, that was Lord Alexander Sinclair and, God help her, she still loved him!

"How long have you lived with your grandfather?" she inquired.

"I don't. My home is roughly a hundred miles to the north."

Marina couldn't conceal her dismay and he noticed it. Their eyes met, and for that moment they were only conscious of each other, intensely conscious. Alex was the first to look away.

7

Alex was shocked when he saw his grandfather, who had recently been ill. He hardly recognized him. Sir Ralph had shrunk from a robust, hearty knight to a feeble husk of his former self.

"'Tis this clock in here," he said, thumping his chest. "It oft forgets to keep the proper time."

They were closeted together in Sir Ralph's study, seated in front of a cheery fire, goblets of brandy in their hands. The old man was very curious to hear what his favorite grandson had been up to. Ralph was well aware that Alex was a bold, somewhat rash young man. Even so, he was totally unprepared for the incredible story he listened to, a tale that filled his heart with pride, yet in spite of it, alarm.

Cairnmore sucked in his breath. "Christ's blood, Alex, the risks you take! You might all have lost your heads. Aye, and you will be in dire trouble if your friend Fraser lives long enough to divulge your identi-

ties to Walsingham. If that happens you dare never enter England again." He scratched his chin for a moment as he mulled it over, and continued worriedly, "'Tis hard to predict how King James will react once he gets wind of this, which he will."

Alex snorted, "He should applaud *any* scheme to free his mother!"

"Aye, but will he? There's the alliance to consider."

"Surely it's not worth more to him than the life of his mother?"

Ralph eyed him in exasperation. "You know well enough that it's not as simple as that. Besides, the King's mind has long since been turned against his mother. Faith, she's nothing but a stranger to him, and a troublesome one at that!"

Cairnmore admired his grandson's courage and daring, it was true, but these fine qualities must be tempered with sound judgment if a man hoped to retain his head upon his shoulders. Yet . . . he understood

and sympathized with Alex and why he was constantly driven to prove himself; his situation within the Sinclair family was a difficult one. But at the same time Ralph was afraid that Alex's recklessness would bring him grief. He wondered if Alex had stopped to consider the possible repercussions of his actions before plunging ahead, and thought not.

Sighing, Ralph turned to the next problem. "What of Marina Dudley? How does she fit into this fantastic picture?" He was almost afraid to hear the answer.

Alex told him everything he knew about Marina, and why she was with them now.

"You kidnapped her?"

"Nay, she came willingly."

The elderly man waved his hand impatiently. "Willing or unwilling, it makes no difference in the eyes of the law. 'Tis a serious crime to remove a

married woman from the jurisdiction of her husband, and well you know it." He scowled at the young man now, muttering, "One more crime laid at your doorstep."

Alexander's face fell. This was not the sort of reception he had expected at all. Ralph himself had had many an adventure in his youth and generally enjoyed hearing about his grandson's exploits. Disappointed, Alex felt a touch of self-righteous anger. This then was the thanks he got for trying to do the right thing; the noble thing. No ring of applause here! And to think that he had assured Marina that Sir Ralph was an easygoing, jolly old fellow!

"You cannot take the girl to Castle Augusta."

"That I know," the younger man muttered.

"Well, what means this woman to you?"

A touch of color rose in Alexander's face. How to answer that? He wasn't certain himself just what Marina meant to him, though he suspected that she was beginning to mean too much for his peace of mind. "Naturally, I feel sorry for her," he replied evasively. "She was in desperate straits."

"And you would like me to take her in, eh?"

Alex pretended surprise at the question, as if it had never crossed his mind. "Nay . . . why would I ask that of you? I only thought to stop here in passing"

"Thought to stop in passing!" Ralph mocked. "Lad, I might be old and gray but there's nothing wrong with my mind." He eyed the younger man sternly. " 'Tis high time that you weighed up the consequences before acting, not just in regard to yourself, but for the good of your family and clan as well."

This was mortifying! To come here and be harangued, criticized, and lectured! To be treated as if he were still a boy, rather than the man he was. Alex held his tongue only because he loved and respected his

grandfather, but he was shocked and hurt at the way the old man had turned on him, and so angry that he didn't trust himself to speak.

"Very well," said Sir Ralph, "the lass can bide here."

"Nay, I would not presume"

"You would presume anything," the other said with a harsh laugh.

"I would not want you to think"

"Since when have you cared *what* people think?"

Alexander stood up, his face tight. "I see I made a mistake in stopping here," he said stiffly. "I will leave you in peace in the morning."

The elderly knight leaned forward and caught his arm. "Sit down, lad," he said more softly. "Sit down and pour us a wee bit more brandy."

It was not easy, thought Cairnmore, to be Alexander Sinclair.

It had all started with Alicia and Angus MacKellar, the Earl and Countess of Kilgarin, more than forty years ago. Alicia, only twenty-two at the time, had been Kilgarin's second wife. His first, Magdalen, had been divorced for infidelity and she hated the young woman who had taken her place and vowed that no child of hers would inherit the chieftainship of the MacKellar clan. When Alicia gave birth to a daughter while her lord was away at war, Magdalen kidnapped the infant and bribed the midwife to destroy her. Instead, the woman gave the babynamed Alyssato a friend of her own family to be raised, but

she never told her the true identity of the little girl.

Alyssa grew up in abject poverty unaware of who she really was, but when she was older her radiant beauty attracted the eye of handsome Blake Sinclair, the Earl of Belrose and chief of his clan. While he loved the humble village girl with a rare passion,

Sinclair was forced to bow to the pressure of his family and marry a woman of his own rank but always he was drawn back to the beautiful Alyssa.

As long as she lived the girl was a threat to Lady Magdalen. When Magdalen discovered that Alyssa was still alive and could incriminate her, she tried to hunt her down. Fearing for her life, Alyssa rashly married Sir Simon Ogilvy, who, sniffing gain, promised to protect her. It was while she was married to Ogilvy that Alyssa gave birth to Blake Sinclair's son, Alexander.

Eventually circumstances were such that Alyssa and Blake were finally able to marry, and the chief immediately set about trying to have his son legitimated. He encountered formidable obstacles in trying to prove that Alex was his. The head of the Ogilvy clan flatly refused to allow Alexander to legally take his real father's name. The boy had been born an Ogilvy and as far as he was concerned would remain one. Neither the best legal brains in the country nor the head of the church and state could resolve the issue.

Years went by and the fight continued. By then Blake and Alyssa had several other children, and their second son, David, safely born in wedlock, was viewed by law as the heir, in spite of the fact that he hadn't been the first born of his parents. Then, when Alexander was fifteen years old, there was an unexpected development. The head of the Ogilvy clan died, and his successor, a more compassionate man, gave his permission for Alex to take his real father's name, but with the proviso that he could never become chief of the clan, long enemies of the Ogilvys.

And there it stood to this day.

Alexander's was an ignominious position to be in, though he came from a close, loving family. Some day in the future he must bow to the leadership of his

younger brothersurely, thought Ralph, a bitter pill to swallow. Just

the same, the knight thought it unwise to be too soft and sympathetic with a young man of Alexander's bold temperament, as his conduct over the past few months had proved. Cairnmore felt it his duty as grandfather to point out the error of his ways.

Now, as they sat with fresh drinks in their hands, Alex looking understandably annoyed, Sir Ralph began by saying that Alex's attempt to free the Queen had been most laudable if he had only himself to consider. But what of his family and clan? King James had severely punished others for threatening the alliance with England by confiscating their estates, attainting their titles, and either banishing them to a foreign country or sending them to the scaffold.

"Which could happen to the Sinclairs," he said, rapping his grandson smartly on the knee. "Besides, have you ever wondered why all the other attempts to free Queen Mary have failed?"

"Doubtless they were poorly planned," Alex muttered.

"Hardly likely!" Ralph scoffed. "Powerful kings of foreign countries were behind some of those plots; they say even the Pope himself. Nay, there's more to it than that. Many feel now that either consciously or unconsciously Mary sabotaged many of these conspiracies herself; that she has a deep desire to die as a martyr for the Catholic religion."

Alex stared at him. He had never considered that.

But when it came to the question of Marina Dudley his ready temper flared.

"You would have had me leave her to the mercy of her brutish husband?"

The old man shook his head. Better, he said, to have returned Marina to her guardian, or, failing that, given her over to the Church. "They would not have

turned her away with such obvious marks of violence on her face. Mayhap some place could have been found for her in a nunnery."

When Alex didn't reply, Ralph went on firmly, "And that, young sir, is as far as you should have gone with the English girl. Your first responsibility is to your own family." He leaned forward to stress his next words. "Remember this: for every action there is a reaction. Now you must wait and see what comes of the deeds you have done."

Alex felt uncharacteristically subdued when he left his grandfather's study. The old man's parting remark made him feel a little uneasy, then he shrugged it off. Sir Ralph, he thought, was old and infirm now and it had made him fretful and overcautious. Faith, he mused, nothing would get done if one first stopped to mull over the consequences. He was safely back in Scotland now and the English could not touch him.

Early the following morning his friends departed for their Highland homes, but Alex had decided to tarry another day or two to spend time with his grandfather.

The lads nodded gravely when he explained his reason for staying.

"What a dutiful grandson you are, Alexander," said Robert Douglas with a grin. "I must commend you for your attention to the knight."

"Be gone with you!" Alex chuckled, guessing what they were thinking. He slapped the rump of Douglas's horse, sending it away at a gallop, the others following. Alex watched them until they disappeared into the fog that had crept in from the sea only a few hundred yards away.

It was that hushed time of the early morning just after the break of dawn, and once his friends de-

parted, everything grew very still except for the eternal thudding of the sea breaking against the cliffs on the other side of the hill. Alex stood for a moment at the end of the long driveway leading up to the house, sniffing the morning air though not for long. He had left his warm bed and hurried out without his cloak to bid the lads Godspeed on their long ride home. Now the ghostlike mist settled on his face and hair and shrouded the stately elms and beech trees lining either side of the driveway. There was hardly more than an inch or two of snow on the ground, but the air was frigid.

Turning, he hurried back to the house feeling chilled to the bone. The building was in darkness, even the servants still abed. With all the fires long since gone out, the atmosphere was almost as cold inside as it was without, and as Alex crossed the shadowy hall and started up the stairs, he thought longingly of the warm bed he had recently vacated. Now that bed would be stone-cold and far from inviting.

His chamber was near the end of the upstairs corridor. Passing Marina's room, he paused for a moment to listen, remembering with a touch of irritation her coolness to him ever since they had left the

Four Doves and doves were supposed to be a symbol of peace! A mischievous idea seized him. Lady, he thought, I think you would have to agree that I've done quite a lot for you. Now 'tis time that *you* did something for me.

With a swift glance up and down the silent corridor, he cautiously turned the handle of her door and stealthily slipped into the room, quietly closing and locking the door behind him. It was even darker here than it had been outside, and Alex stood still for a moment until his eyes adjusted to the gloom, his heart pounding with excitement. He had an urge to laugh as

he wondered what she would do when she woke up to find him there, but at least it would break the ice that now stood like a glass wall between them.

After a moment Alex tiptoed over to the bed.

Marina lay on her back with her long hair tumbled about her on the pillow, one bare arm thrown back over her head, the heavy quilt drawn up to her chest, the tops of her shoulders peeping out over the covers. He sucked in a breath when he realized that below the sheets she was naked, and she *would* be, of course, having rushed away from Baxton Hall with nothing but his dead friend's clothes to her name.

Alex bent down to take a closer look at her and felt a start of surprise. In the semidarkness Marina seemed almost pretty. Much of the puffiness and swelling on her face had gone down, and in the poor light her bruises were less obvious. It struck Alex that she might even be rather attractive once her features returned to normal. Aye, he thought, bending even closer, his eyes on her soft parted lips and her lashes that lay thick and dark as the fringe of a gypsy's shawl against her cheeks, she looked *very* attractive to him at that moment.

He listened intently for a minute, but the house was still. He quickly undressed and eased back the quilt and slipped in under the sheets beside her, his breath quick and ragged now. It was cozy, and the warmth closed around his chilled flesh like a cocoon. He waited a moment or two, giving his skin a chance to warm up and it heated fast when he thought of the naked body so close to him then moved a little nearer. Now he could smell the fresh scent of her and feel her breath whispering across his cheek, the silken touch of her hair under his skin, and in the half-light Alex stared at her profile, which he saw was quite

lovely, and asked himself, as he had done many times before, what it was that drew him to Marina Dudley.

'Twas her eyes, he decided, definitely her eyes. She seemed very young; there was a charming aura of innocence and naiveté about Marina but there was nothing remotely innocent about her seductive dark eyes! Each time they met his, Alex felt as if he were in the grip of sorcery. Mayhap she was a witch, he mused, studying her while giving himself a chance to warm up. That would explain the strange hold she had over him. But he was hot now, and, witch or not, he had to have her!

He raised his hand and felt her firm young breast, and it seemed to fit his palm as if it had been tailor-made, her nipple like a button that triggered off a pounding desire deep within him.

Marina found herself in the throes of an erotic dream wherein a phantom lover was doing shameful things with her, touching and stroking her everywhere, slowly invading all the private parts of her body. Shameful it might be, but she had no desire to wake up, to tear herself away from sensations that swiftly propelled her toward ecstasy. A feather-light hand fondled her breasts and teased her nipples to rigid expectancy, then trailed a path of fire over her shoulders and down to her ribs, lazily tracing the slender curve of her hips, the shape of her thighs, the velvety softness of the area between her legs. She could not restrain a gasp of shock and excitement when those bold ghostly fingers gently parted her sex and began to toy with the moist female parts of her, almost casually at first, then with more focused intent.

A faint shudder ran the length of her body and her lips parted in a rapturous sigh. Soon, as the fingers began to move rapidly now, her breath came in short

little spurts and a great burst of heat fanned out over her flesh, each nerve vibrantly alert and tingling. When a hot, seeking mouth closed over her lips and she felt his tongue penetrate the inside of her mouth, there to tease and mingle with her own in voluptuous imitation of the act of love itself, the phantom lover began to assume a familiar shape and personality one she quickly thrust aside.

"Nay!" she cried, trying to convince herself, desperate to hang on to the notion of a dream. This must be one of those strange nighttime experiences whereby demon spirits assume mortal shape for the

pleasure of taking possession of living bodies. The countryside around Chiltern Castle had been replete with such tales. Soon he would depart and leave her in peace provided she didn't open her eyes and see him, for if she did, he would return to haunt her, to pleasure her in his wicked way for the rest of her life.

Marina kept her eyes firmly closed, her mind closed also to the idea that it might *not* be a demon. She was breathless with excitement, trembling with anticipation, aware now of what was bound to come. His palpitating fingers set her aflame, and as his mouth burned down on hers, hard and urgent, Marina felt him reach for her hand and place it over something smooth and hot and so large that it made her moan in a mixture of alarm and wanton craving.

The blood rushed to the surface of her skin, her heart pounding so wildly that it made her dizzy. He didn't speak, nor did she, but Marina could clearly hear the sounds of their rising passion and feel the love-dew moistening their skin. Suddenly a shuddering wave of tingling fire blazed up from her loins, spreading until every cell in her body shrieked with desire.

She stiffened and arched against him. Instantly he mounted her, big, powerful, ready as she was, his muscular body fitting erotically to her own, hard where she was soft, unyielding where she was pliant. She felt him grasp her legs and raise them high to curve around his hips, then he slipped his hands under her buttocks and plunged deep inside her.

Oh, the rapture! The savage, lustful hunger! Alex made love to her in a kind of frenzy as he sensed her need, wild as his own. He invaded and withdrew, teased and tantalized, bringing her joy of such intensity that Marina felt as if her very bones would melt in the steamy heat of their passion. Release came in a shattering wave of ecstasy that left her limp and quivering against him.

Still they said nothing to each other, though Alex held her close, his warm hand stroking her bare back, his lips nuzzling her cheeks and ears, the arch of her throat, her skin tasting salty.

A faint shaft of sunshine brightened the room, chasing the shadows.

Marina could no longer deceive herself. A phantom lover would have departed before daylight, as his species were known to do but here he was still beside her! She refused to turn her head to look at him, but she couldn't ignore the stern little voice of her conscience, chiding,

"Marina, well you know that he is no ghost."

Alex, wondering at her continued silence, raised himself on an elbow and smiled down at her. Peeking at him through her lashes, Marina saw that he was flushed and relaxed and looked quite pleased with himself. There was no sign of remorse or contrition on that handsome face. Suddenly she was furious.

"How dare you come into my chamber thus!" she

whispered fiercely. "Do you think you can bed me whenever you like? Mayhap you've forgotten that I'm a lady!"

His brows went up and he laughed. "You wanted that as much as I did, so don't deny it. Come, Marina," he went on somewhat impatiently, "let us make up. I hope you are not of the ilk to hold a grudge or store up grievances."

"I have every right to feel aggrieved!" Her eyes blazed with resentment. "What of that night at the Four Doves when you accused me of trying to trick you? You took my virginity, then"her voice cracked"offered to pay. And you expect me *not* to be offended!"

Alex felt uncomfortable and looked away, conceding, "Mayhap I erred, and if so I'm sorry." He went on cautiously, "I like you, Marina, and think highly of you." He turned and caught her hand and raised it to his lips, murmuring, "My pardon for insulting you," watching her from under his brows, hoping she would accept his apology, which he meant sincerely, so that they could resume their former relationship and enjoy the short time remaining to them before he left for home. He should have gone back with the others; there would be much business awaiting his attention at Castle Augusta. Aside from that, his family would be concerned about him. Aye, he should have returned with his friends, but he hadn't been able to tear himself away from Marina so abruptly, though perhaps, he thought ruefully, that might have been the better way.

And of course she forgave him. "Oh, Alex," she said and smiled, forgetting their quarrel and remembering instead all the things he had done for her. "Alex, how much happier I feel now." Her eyes, resting on him,

were melting. The look she gave him made his heart turn over. Alex took her in his arms and kissed her deeply, tenderly, with all the depth of feeling welling up inside him, feelings he had never known himself capable of. Then as if his tongue and mind were somehow separated he was astonished to hear himself say, "That husband of yours is old and cannot live forever. Eventually the day will come when you will be free . . . free to take another husband, if it pleases you. Nothing can be done now," he hurried on when he saw her eyes widen, "not with that knave obstructing things. 'Tis pointless to plan, but that does not mean that we cannot, ah . . . enjoy each other. I will visit you here as often as I can."

She buried her face in his neck and hugged him fiercely. "I love you so much. *So much!* How I shall miss you when you leave"

"Hark!" He lifted his head and they could both hear movement in the house, a door closing, footsteps, one servant calling to another.

Marina caught his hand. "We cannot have them finding you in my chamber! Imagine what Sir Ralph would think."

He kissed her and grinned. "Then arise so that we might make the best of the time remaining to us. You can borrow a gown from one of the housemaids until others can be made for you."

They smiled at each other, both suddenly blissfully happy.

"My Marina . . ." he said, a catch in his voice, sudden soaring joy in his heart as he beheld her face, bruised and battered as it was, so beautiful to him at that moment. Wonderingly he took it between his hands, gently, cherishingly as one might hold a wounded bird, and gazed deep into her eyes. "I love

you and no other. *You*, my dearest heart. And happy I am that I found you. Think not that I will ever let you go."

Alex could tarry for only two more days at Cairnmore House, and every possible minute of them they spent together. He snuck into her room at night, though out of respect for her he resisted making love to her again. They walked in the gardens, though they were bare at that time of year, and along the cliffs beside the sea hand in hand. Alex assured Marina that he had left enough funds to provide for whatever she needed, and would send more to her once he had access to his funds. He made clear that he wished her to have everything she desired and want for nothing.

Over and over again he promised to return to visit her as much as possible.

"I'd die," she said, "if I never saw you again."

Alex knew that it was going to be very hard to tear himself away. The young English lass had crept into his heart and taken it prisoner. "When I go," he told her, "the best part of me will remain here with you." And he lifted her hand and placed it over his heart.

Madly in love as they were, they had to know everything about each

other. In the shelter of a cave mouth on the beach, they talked for hours. For the first time in his life Alexander was glad that he wasn't the heir to his clan. He could well imagine the roar of protest if he were to announce his intention of linking himself to an English woman, a girl with neither dowry or title or as far as he knew influence of any kind. His own parents were surprisingly broad-minded, but not so others of his clan. Had he been the heir, he might have had a rebellion on his hands under these circumstances, because it was vital to the good of his House that a future chief marry well.

Alex decided then that the time had come to tell his love about his background and explain his anomalous position in his family. Marina was startled to learn that Alex, though the eldest in his family, would not inherit his father's earldom and that it would go to his younger brother instead. "I was born out of wedlock, though my parents subsequently married."

When he finished telling her the story, Marina sighed, her expression dreamy. "What a romance your parents must have had!"

"Aye," he said, "and they are mad about each other still, which I suppose is unusual after all this time. She's his sweet Highland Rose except when they have a spat," he grinned, "for my mother is strong-willed and has a temper. At such times he calls her his Wild Rose. I think sometimes he enjoys her willfulness. It gives him the pleasure of taming her."

Marina squeezed his hand. "Darling, some day that will be us."

"Would that that day were now!" Alex replied feelingly.

Marina enjoyed hearing about his family, nor was she dismayed that Alex had been born out of wedlock, since it was a common enough thing. She was glad that he didn't seem to hold a grudge, as many might have done, that he would never be the Earl of Belrose. "Nay," he said when she asked him about it, "not now, though when I was younger; when I was old enough to understand the position, I went through some turmoil and resentment. In a way . . ." he thought about it for a minute, ". . . I think it has been harder for my brother David, odd as that might sound." He leaned forward and kissed her on the nose. "Well, enough of me, what of Marina Dudley?"

Marina thought that her own background was dull and mundane after listening to Alexander's, except

for the part where the Spaniard had entered her life. Her lover's brows rose when she related what had happened, how her reckless claim had brought her to the attention of Sir Francis Walsingham.

"You jest?" he asked, laughing.

"Nay, 'tis true. And after that, Lord Dacre would not allow his son to wed me, so the Percys married me to Edgar Stafford instead."

"Dudley . . . ?" Alexander's mind went back to the time he had spent at the English court. He recalled all the rumors about Queen Elizabeth and Robert Dudley, also the gossip about the handsome Earl of Leicester and *other* women, because there had been others. Now, gazing into Marina's beautiful dark eyes, Alex felt a touch of excitement. "Is there any chance that it might be true? Marina, what if you really *are* their bastard daughter?"

She burst out laughing. "Nay, 'twas all a tissue of lies dreamed up by that miserable Spaniard." Then sobering, she said grimly, "Now, because of that swine, my name is marked down in Walsingham's book."

"Mine too, doubtless," Alex said with a rueful grin. "That is, if Jamie Fraser lived long enough to divulge it."

"Oh, Alex!" The thought frightened her, and Marina pressed herself into his arms. "They couldn't petition King James to have you sent back to England, could they? To stand trial, I mean, for trying to free Queen Mary?"

"Well . . . they probably will petition the King," he replied. "They certainly won't just let it drop. But the King would never send me back, nor would the people let him. Of course, I can never go back to England again."

She hugged him. "I'm afeared."

It was chilling to Marina to contemplate her sweetheart's name written down in Walsingham's book. The head of the Queen's secret police was a man who struck terror into the hearts of many. Dread stories had been circulated about Walsingham, tales of riders galloping up to houses in the middle of the night, of his agents plucking some poor unfortunate out of his bed to whisk him away into the darkness, never to be seen or heard of again. And of shrieks drifting out of the torture chambers of the Tower of London, of people

being tossed into the rat pit and eaten alive by the savage creatures there, or subjected to the Scavenger's Daughter, or crippled in the Little Ease. Oh, God, Marina prayed as they walked back to Cairnmore House arm in arm, please don't let Alex ever fall into Walsingham's hands! She turned to him and said, "You must never, ever go back to England!"

He grinned, pulling her closer. "There's no need. England has come to me." And he kissed her.

When he released her, she warned, "Alex, 'tis no laughing matter."

Alex saw how troubled she was then and sought to reassure her. "My love, forget not that we are in Scotland now. Walsingham cannot touch us here. Come, be happy and forget what went before. Think of us now and in our future."

Marina relaxed a little then, but the uneasiness at the back of her mind didn't completely leave her, much as she tried to block it out. The minutes and hours winged by with astonishing speed, running through her fingers like sand on the beach, impossible to hold on to or slow down.

"Lie with me tonight," she said, the evening before

he left. "I want you to, Alex. I need to feel your arms around me."

He rose before daylight the next morning while Marina was still asleep, thinking it would be easier for her for both of them. Taking care not to wake her, Alex touched his lips to hers, looked at her for a moment, and left.

8

Even before Alexander had arrived at Baxton Hall and met Marina, there had been a grave development in London. It had been Sir Francis Walsingham's painful duty to inform the Queen that there had been yet another plot to free Mary Stuart. It could not have come at a worse time. At that very moment Elizabeth's counselors were pressing her to sign her cousin's death warrant, and this time Parliament would not allow her to procrastinate.

Much as she hated the Queen of Scots, she hated more the thought of being the one to bring about her death. Monarchs, Elizabeth felt

strongly, were above the laws of other mortals and should not be tried and condemned like common criminals. The idea of one Queen sending another to the block filled Elizabeth with reluctance and horror. Further, it could set a dangerous example that one day might backfire on herself.

"Tell me of this plot," she asked wearily.

It had been hatched in Scotland, Walsingham informed her. Though two of the conspirators had been killed in the fray and the leader and the others managed to evade capture, they had one prisoner. "And we have convinced that prisoner to reveal the names of the others involved."

"Ah . . . you have a way of persuading these rogues to unburden themselves. The name of the leader, if you will?"

When he told her, the Queen reared back in her chair. "What? That comely boy?"

"A boy no longer, Your Grace. Sinclair is of age and well aware of what he was about. He's a criminal like any other and deserving of meet punishment. We must petition the King of Scotland to have this scoundrel returned to us to stand trial for his crime."

Sir Francis Walsingham was a grave, meticulous man and a staunch Protestant. Like her other chief counselor, William Cecil, his whole life was dedicated to serving the Queen and guarding her interests. Keenly observant, intelligent, and not a man who was easily deceived, the black-bearded Walsingham was appreciated more by Elizabeth for his professional services than for his charm of manner. He tended to be terse and abrupt and bluntly honest, in contrast to the meeching courtiers who flocked around her, and he had one failing that often irked the Queen. Walsingham suspected everyone of scheming against her, even those closest to her not excepting Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester.

Now she thought that his overzealousness had got the better of his wits. King James would hardly send one of his own nobles back to England to almost certain death for trying to rescue his own mother! Nor did she hesitate to point that out.

He stared at her, knowing how unpredictable and fickle she could be, and it was this trait in her character that he found hardest to deal

with. There she sat wavering, an aging woman of fifty-two, as thin as a cane, her golden eyes now faintly sunken and surrounded by lines, her reddish hair faded and graying though she vainly tried to hide all this with pastes and dyes. Walsingham cared nothing for her appearance. It was her shrewd, clever mind that he admired and respected, though he frequently wished that she would be more decisive.

"This nobleman is a continuing threat to your royal person," he pointed out.

"Aye," she nodded. "Nobody who conspires against Elizabeth of England can do so with impunity, but we cannot afford a repeat of that Babington fiasco. This business must be handled in secret."

Walsingham smiled. "If it please Your Grace, I think I know a way how it can be done."

Alexander left at dawn to return to the Highlands. He had said his goodbyes the night before, but Marina rose early and watched him depart from the window of her room, and as if he sensed her standing there, he turned in the saddle at the end of the driveway and blew a kiss in the direction of her window.

Then he vanished into the mist blowing in from the sea.

Marina had a sudden, terrifying premonition that she would never see him again. For a second she was tempted to dash down to the stables and jump on a horse and fly after him to warn him of the dread feeling that had seized her heart. But she knew Alex would have laughed at her misgivings and chided her about having so little faith in him. He was brave and strong and feared nothing and admired the same traits

in others, and for her to doubt him showed lack of confidence in his ability to take care of himself.

Marina tried to shake off the uneasiness without much success. She knew from talking to Alex that it was a long ride back to the Highlands, much of it over bleak moorland and rugged mountains and she wished fervently now that he had gone home with his friends. Cutthroats and bandits roamed these remote areas, as they did in England, men on the lookout for those traveling alone. Courageous as Alex was, he was only one man, and so often brigands ran in packs, like wolves scouring the countryside in search of prey.

"God keep you, my love," Marina whispered, a hand over her heart.
"And bring you back to me soon."

Until then she would wait for a letter from him, as he had promised, to say he had reached home safely.

On the first part of his journey Alex hugged the coastline with its beautiful view of the sea and the mountains of the island of Arran in the bay, white-capped against the wintry blue of the morning sky. At the little town of Monkton he turned inland, skirted the larger town of Kilmarnock, and struck out across the vast, treeless expanse of the Fenwick Moor, desolate and bare and treacherous with bogs and quicksand. Here the going was slow and tedious and would normally have been irksome for a man of Alexander's nature, but that morning he felt in fine spirits and instead of cursing under his breath at having to pick his way so carefully for fear of stumbling in the mire, he whistled cheerily and now and then said aloud, still with that sense of surprise and awe, "God's blood, I'm in love with an English lass! Aye, and not the bonniest lass I've ever seen either."

Once away from the salty air of the sea Sinclair

immediately encountered more snow on the ground and a chillier nip to the atmosphere. He pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head and wriggled his toes to stimulate the circulation inside his knee-length boots. As he rode along, Alex paid scant attention to the occasional farmhouse he passed or the hamlets and villages that thickened the closer he got to the city of Glasgow. Except for short rests and to change his mount, he pressed on steadily north and, bone-weary and freezing cold by then, stopped that first night in Stirling.

Next day he had more difficult terrain to face, the craggy Grampian Mountains, the last hurdle between him and his Highland home. Again Alex started out at dawn, bracing himself for the arduous trip ahead, and it wasn't long before he found himself struggling through deep snow in the wild mountain passes, some tracks so deep that they were blocked entirely, forcing him to make countless detours. He had hoped to be at Castle Augusta before dark. Instead, he was compelled to spend the night in the little village of Dalwhinnie and save the last lap of his journey for the following morning.

In the early afternoon, his third on the road, Alex was on a track leading directly to Augusta, almost within sight of the castle itself, when he rounded a bend to find an obstruction blocking the path

ahead, a small band of gypsies in their garishly painted wagons, one of which was barring his way.

"Good day to you," Sinclair greeted a swarthy fellow who hurried up to meet him, one who, he noticed automatically, was surprisingly well armed for a tinker. Pointing at the wagon, he said, "Be good enough to pull that cart aside. I'm on my way to the castle yonder," and he pointed up ahead.

"Be you Lord Alexander Sinclair?" the gypsy in-

quired, smiling pleasantly.

"That I am."

Suddenly the tinker pulled a pistol out of his belt and aimed it at Alex's chest. "Then you are under arrest."

When Alex reached for his own weapon, the other shot his horse out from under him, the animal pinning him to the ground, and as he struggled to free himself he saw men pouring from the wagons, none of them gypsies, Alex saw at once.

9

Marina's worry about Alex persisted for a few days; then, with a great effort of will, she managed to get the better of it, telling herself that if anyone could take care of himself it was Alexander Sinclair. Had he not evaded the clutches of the Queen's men even while still on English soil? Now that he was safely back in Scotland where Walsingham couldn't touch him the bold Alex could well handle anything else that might rear its head; he knew his homeland and the areas to avoid, places where brigands might lie in wait for the lone traveler. So, she convinced herself, it was ridiculous to fret when she should have been deliriously happy.

Marina felt better after that; more than better. Alex loved her; he had hinted that if anything were to happen to her husband and she were free, then he might make her his wife! The thought that her dearest

wish stood a good chance of coming true brought a shine to Marina's eyes and a bloom to her cheeks. Now she lived for the day when she would see her love again. Alex had promised to visit her soon.

One day a strange little cart bounced jauntily up the driveway to Cairnmore House drawn by two fine horses. It was small, swift, a conveyance such as Marina had never seen before, one that had been designed by its female owner.

She was about to meet the indomitable Elsie Cairnmore and her husband, Garth.

The couple strode into the hall bringing a whiff of their barnyard with them. Garth had mud on his boots, and his nails, Marina noticed, were none too clean. The jacket and breeches he wore were stained and rumpled but his wife was in her country best in a wine-red velvet cloak lined with miniver, a truly fantastic hat on her head sporting flowers, birds, and even a dangling bunch of grapes.

Marina, startled, gaped at them with almost as much surprise and curiosity as they were regarding her, for Ralph's son and his wife were nothing like she imagined they would be. It struck her too that the knight seemed a bit embarrassed when he introduced her to the couple. Upon learning who she was, and how she had come to be there, Elsie Cairnmore cried, "Imagine, an English lass living at Cairnmore House! I declare, I never thought to see the day!"

"Isn't that just like Lord Alex?" said her husband, heaving a sigh.

Both of them stared hard at the bruises on Marina's face.

Sir Ralph had been kind and welcoming from the start, but within minutes of meeting them Marina sensed that Garth and Elsie resented her being there.

The couple ran Sir Ralph's main farm at Monkwood, where they raised prize bulls as well as sheep, goats, and crops such as barley and rye. Garth Cairnmore was every inch the country squire; a big, rather loud-spoken man of forty with a florid face and booming laugh, he was a popular figure in the county, a hard drinker and always quick with a lewd joke. His helpmeet, Elsie the mother of five lusty sons was a strong-willed, managerial woman whose chief satisfaction in life was to organize things her family, the finances and business of running the farm, even the community of Maybole when she could get away with it. She was a rotund, bustling little woman with very red cheeks and bright eyes the color of black currants. Those eyes were piercing and strongly disapproving when they observed the new member of the family.

"So ye ran away from your man, eh?" she asked, frowning.

"He beat me severely." Which was obvious.

"That may be, lassie. Many have to suffer the discipline o' their men. What I would like to ken is what ye intend to do now?" The small, alert eyes bored into her, alive with suspicion. "What's a' this between you and Lord Alex"

"Elsie, let the lass be!" Sir Ralph broke in, scowling at his daughter-in-law from under his bristling gray brows. "Keep that inquisitive nose of yours to yourself."

Ralph was one of the few people able to keep Elsie in her place, mainly because he was still the head of the family and the one with all the wealth, so while she might bristle and huff and puff, while her greedy little fingers might itch to take command, Elsie was also canny and wise enough to accord him grudging respect and a certain amount of deference.

But her husband, Garth, far less acute and clever than his wife, pointed out officiously, "It's a terrible crime to break one's marriage vows. I hope no trouble comes to *us* because of this, Father."

"Bah!" snorted the elderly knight. "The lass is from England, and the English have no jurisdiction here."

Marina was pink with embarrassment. When they finally left, she said, "Perhaps Alex shouldn't have brought me here. I would hate to cause trouble for you, Sir Ralph."

He threw back his head and laughed. It would be a sorry day, he said, when he allowed Garth and Elsie to upset him. Elsie, he went on, frowning, was not the sort of wife he would have chosen for his son, but Garth had taken a powerful fancy to her and wouldn't be dissuaded, even though she was from a lower station than himself. Now he feared that some of Elsie's coarseness had rubbed off on his son.

"She's an interfering, bossy woman! She's also cunning and grasping and can hardly wait to see me in my box so that she can get her greedy hands on my money. That woman would take over the world if given half a chance!" Ralph fumed, his eyes glittering with anger. Then they softened a little when they fell on Marina's battered face. "This is still my house and you are my guest and the Monkwood crew

must like it or lump it for you are staying, Marina! Now let that be the end of it."

Marina discovered that there had been a change in the organization and management of Cairnmore House since Sir Ralph's recent illness, and though the old man struggled mightily to keep a tight grip on the reins, it was his son and daughter-in-law who really had the grip of them, at least where certain things were concerned. The couple had taken it upon them-

selves to discharge all of Ralph's old servants while he was indisposed, using the excuse that they had become lax in their duties with no one to keep a sharp eye on them. New servants had been hired, including a valet for Sir Ralph, a man called Beech who, the knight muttered darkly, had been placed in his house to spy on his activities for Monkwood.

He chuckled grimly, in some ways enjoying the power struggle. "They especially hate it when my lawyer comes to the house, and thanks to Beech, they always know when he visits me."

Ralph detested his valet and certainly didn't make things easy for him. One afternoon while he was chatting with Marina by the hall fire, Beech appeared silently in the doorway to announce that it was time for his nap. The elderly man swung around to face him, crying, "Christ's foot, leave me in peace!"

"I'm sorry, sir," replied the thin, colorless Beech, a man of about thirty with a straw-colored beard and thinning sandy hair, "but your doctor has instructed me to see that you obey orders. 'Tis for your own good," he added quickly when Ralph glowered at him.

When the valet hurried forward to help him up from his chair, Ralph shoved him aside and held out a hand to Marina instead. On the way upstairs he muttered under his breath, "To have come to this pass . . . to be handled like a babe in my advanced years. Nay!" his voice rose, "I will not have it!"

The bedchamber they entered was large and comfortable, with fine polished furniture and flowers from the greenhouse arranged around the room. A cheery fire crackled in the grate and the covers of the huge bed had already been turned down. It was a high bed, and when again Beech made to help him get in, the old knight suddenly roared, "Unhand me, you pest! What

a state of affairs this is when a man cannot get into his own bed and must be put there by a nursemaid."

Determinedly, he struggled into bed himself and fell back exhausted against the pillows. He glared up at the valet triumphantly. "See! I can manage well enough if given the chance. You tell that meddling pair at Monkwood that I don't need you. Garth can find you other employment. If and when the time comes for me to require a nurse, I shall find my own!"

Later that day Marina was reading in the library when Beech took his master's medicine up to his room. He was hardly inside the chamber when Marina heard wrathful shouting. "Nay, take it away, Beech. I'll have no more of that posset, for it tastes like cat piss."

Marina had to smile. Beech certainly had his hands full with his patient. Yet she sympathized with Sir Ralph, thinking that he should at least have been allowed to choose his own valet. The poor old fellow must know that he was losing control over his life, she mused, and Marina could well understand how distressing that was for him, since, according to Alex, Ralph Cairnmore had once been a strong, vigorous man and an excellent manager of his affairs.

Now the "Monkwood crew," as he called them, were determined to take over and Ralph just as determined that they wouldn't!

The following Sunday Elsie and Garth sent the cart to Cairnmore House demanding the presence of Sir Ralph and Marina at Monkwood for dinner. Ralph point-blank refused to go, shuddering, "Nay, I will not expose myself to that again! Their loutish sons and all their kin will be there and the racket would deafen a miller." Then a mischievous glint came into his eyes. "But you go, Marina. You can represent Cairnmore

House. Besides, it will be an eye-opener."

That it most certainly was!

Monkwood was one of the best farms in Ayrshire. It had almost a thousand acres of the most beautiful land that Marina had ever seen in the Carrick Hills, with high meadows sweeping away from the sea, and bubbling streams and rivers where fish swam in profusion in summer. In milder weather plump cattle grazed the verdant green hillsides munching on the sweetest grass to be found in Scotland, according to Garth Cairnmore who proudly showed Marina around.

With the coming of winter the cattle had been brought into the byres, but thick-wooled sheep still roamed the hills, food taken out to them daily. Most of the sheep, Garth explained in his blunt farmer's way, had been "put to the tup" and would lamb after the turn of the year. The lambs would quickly thrive, he told her, since by the sea the weather never got too cold and the salt in the air quickly melted whatever snow they got.

The gray stone farmhouse was stout and rambling, surrounded by the many byres, stables, and other outbuildings. The huge hall when they entered was crowded and noisy with men, women, and children in abundance, most of them members of the family. Of the couple's five sons four of them were married with youngsters. Then there were Elsie's mother and two brothers and several guests other than Marina herself.

They all stared at the English girl with avid curiosity. Her presence among them caused a great stir and a certain amount of hostility. She was, after all, English, and in this rural area many still hated and distrusted their neighbor south of the border. And worse, she was an English woman who had run away from her lawful husband, another thing that didn't set well in

their eyes. Marina suspected that most of them had already heard her story from Elsie, how the reckless Alexander Sinclair had helped her to escape, then dumped her into the lap of Ralph Cairnmore. She was a foreigner and a total stranger, yet the Cairnmores were expected to take care of her. All this Marina read in the inquisitive eyes that raked her over from top to toe, and it was a wonder, she thought, that she was able to withstand it and hold up her head but she did! Fortunately, the majority spoke nothing but broad Scots, which she couldn't understand, so she was spared the details of the comments they were making about her.

The Sunday meal was served, with Elsie and Garth presiding at either end of the long hall table, and what a meal it was! Marina gazed in awe at whole joints of beef, legs of lamb, and a mountain of roast pheasants piled up on a platter. There were also smoked salmon, pickled pigs' feet, and a sea of pies, cakes, and puddings, half of which Marina was certain would never be eaten.

She was wrong. Hands, large and small, shot out in all direction toward the serving dishes, and the children yelped and sniped at each other as they fought over the choicest tasties, even as countless dogs

circled the board growling and snapping as they battled and pounced on scraps tossed over careless shoulders.

Everybody talked at once in the broad Scots lingo that Marina couldn't understand. She was left feeling like a deaf woman trying to follow the action at a pantomime. They laughed, joked, argued, and shouted at each other and the din was ear-splitting. No wonder, she thought, that Sir Ralph refused to subject himself to this again.

When the meal was over, Marina was more than ready to go home, but she wasn't to be let off that easy. The table was shoved back against the wall to make room for the dancing and singing that followed. None of the dances were familiar to the English girl. The wild jigs, strathspeys, and reels made her head spin and her stomach queasy, especially following so soon after the meal, though at first no one came forward to dance with her for which she was glad. Then she noticed Elsie bustling about among her sons, shoving them and nodding to where Marina stood alone watching the others dancing. They were all huge, burly men who towered over their mother, but they obeyed her orders and soon one after the other came forward to sweep the English intruder onto the dance floor. One even had the temerity to pinch her bottom. "No' much there fur a guid feel," he observed.

Finally, thankfully, it was time to go home. Elsie surprised Marina by saying that she would drive her back herself, "in the wee cairt I fashioned."

"You . . . you designed the cart?" Marina was quite impressed.

"Och, aye, 'twas nothing," replied the goodwife as they started off, Elsie again in her best red velvet cloak and the outrageous cornucopia of a hat perched on her head. "A' can turn my hand to anything," she boasted. "To tell the truth, I wouldna see any man standing in ma way." And with a sidelong glance at the girl, who by now looked rather pale, she said, "I ask ye, where would they be without us wimmin?"

By then it was almost dark, and Marina worried aloud, "Are you not afraid to drive out by yourself at this hour?"

"Ha! Afraid? Me? Don't be daft!" she laughed.

Then she startled Marina by whipping a pistol out

from the folds of her very feminine red cloak, a garment that didn't at all suit the doughty Elsie Cairnmore.

"I've got this," she said, waving the weapon about before tucking it back where it had come from. "And I've also got this." Leaning forward, she flipped a lid on a box at the front of the vehicle and jabbed a finger at a naked sword that lay gleaming inside. "Don't worry," she said, grinning at the girl's astonishment. "I ken how to use it too. Nay, lassie"she patted Marina's knee"you are safe enough wi' me."

Marina believed her.

But soon she discovered the reason that Elsie had jumped at the chance to be alone with her. As they jogged along the track bouncing behind the horses, darkness all around them and the night bright and frosty with a sickle moon hanging in the sky, her hostess began peppering her with questions, beginning by saying, "It's time we got to know each other better," though the ensuing conversation was all about Marina. "Now, whit about this husband o' yours?"

Marina was immediately wary. Some instinct warned her not to reveal too much to this woman, since Sir Ralph had made it clear that he didn't trust his daughter-in-law. All she said was that Stafford had subjected her to savage beatings, so vicious that she feared he would one day kill her, so when Alex had stopped at their hall and offered to help her escape she had agreed at once.

"And doubtless ye recompensed Alex well for his trouble, eh?"

The girl stared at her in the dark.

Elsie shifted the reins to her right hand and with the other pinched Marina playfully on the thigh, chuck-

ling, "Ye ken what I meana wee bit o' sport."

Marina flushed scarlet. Now she was glad of the dark for hiding the shameful color burning in her face, but nothing could have made her admit to this nosy woman that she and Alexander had been lovers. Her private life was her own affair.

"We are just friends," Marina replied evasively.

Then Elsie said, "Just as well. I didna think ye were his lordship's kind

at all. He's always had an eye for the bonny ones, and I'm telling ye plain, he's had plenty o' them. His folks wid like to see him married and settled, but as my Garth says, why would a bull cleek himself to one cow when he can take his pick o' a whole field?"

There was nothing to say to that, so Marina kept silent, though she didn't appreciate Elsie's rustic philosophy. Yet she supposed it was natural that Alex would have had other women, even many of them. He was very handsome, very charming, also titled and rich. But that was in the past! What had happened before they met each other didn't matter. Now it was she that he loved, and Marina was determined not to let Elsie Cairnmore's gossip upset her.

"You and the old gent seem to be friends too." The older woman gave her a sly look from the corner of her eye. "But I feel it my duty to give you a piece of advice. Let Beech handle him. Beech is trained in caring for the infirm, so make sure you dinna interfere."

It was an order, no mistake about that.

Alone in her room that night Marina examined herself in the mirror. Once she had been bonny, but now her face was lumpy and lopsided, the black marks now faded to a yellowish purple which if anything looked worse. There was a bump on her chin and a

swelling over her right cheek, and her nose was thicker than normal. It was amazing, considering what Elsie Cairnmore had told her about him, that Alexander would even have looked at her twice.

"Mayhap he's sorry for me," Marina mused aloud as she gazed dully at her reflection in the mirror. "Mayhap it's pity he feels for me, rather than love."

It was a disturbing thought, one Marina didn't want to believe, yet why would a man like Sinclair who could have had any woman fall in love with a girl who was ugly, penniless, even tied to another man?

She lay awake for a long time, but finally took herself in hand. There was no use anticipating trouble before it had even developed; and it *wouldn't* develop, because Alex *did* love her, as he had demonstrated in countless ways. Now she must trust him to be true to her and put Elsie's remarks about him out of her mind. The woman, as Ralph had told her, was a born troublemaker.

Christmas and New Year's came, and this time both Marina and Sir

Ralph were compelled to attend the holiday celebrations at Monkwood. There was just no way to avoid it. Marina had never seen anything like it, the feasting, fighting, drinking, and dancing that went on for days, Elsie supervising everything. Elsie had also arranged to have several new gowns made for Marina by her own seamstress, from money Alex had left Marina. Elsie paid the seamstress in kind a dozen eggs from the farm, some ox tails, a half-sack of grain and she purchased the material cheap from a contact she had at the mill, so there was a surplus of funds left over, cash that by rights should have been returned to Marina. Without a qualm Elsie pocketed it "for her trouble."

Still, Marina was happy enough with her new

clothes, particularly the sea-green silk gown she wore to the New Year's ball, a color that greatly suited her. Even better, her swollen features had improved, so much so that she received many startled glances from the Cairnmores. The youngest of the boys, Jake, actually asked her for several dances without being prodded. Staring at her, he blurted, "Am no' married, ye ken," his eyes dropping from her face to fix longingly on the lush whiteness of her breasts rising proudly above the neckline of her gown. Her improved appearance prompted him to make her a generous offer. "If that auld man o' yours draps deid I might consider wedding you myself, aye, even if ye *dinna* have a dowry." Jake was as huge and loutish as his brothers, but he had the added disadvantage of looking dim and went about with his wide mouth hanging open. Fortunately, his amorous inclinations were nipped in the bud when his father tapped him on the shoulder. "My turn, lad," he said, shoving the youth aside. Garth whirled Marina around the room a time or two, then inquired casually, "Have you heard from Alex since he returned to the Highlands?"

"Nay, not yet," she replied, though he had hardly been gone for very long.

Garth Cairnmore's eyes studied her for a moment, and something he spied in her face made him warn her, "It could be long and weary before you do. 'Tis as well to know that so you don't go on hoping. Alex"he sighed"is not the constant sort at all. He's had more women than you'd care to count."

Marina could not hide how those careless words hurt her and for a minute had to struggle to compose her face; she felt like weeping. Why hadn't he at least written? she asked herself anxiously. Even a

few lines would have satisfied her. But feeling Garth's inquisi-

tive eyes on her, she gave herself a mental shake. She must have faith in Alex! No doubt he had been very busy since returning home, and would contact her just as soon as he could. Nay, she would not allow Garth and his wife to put poisonous doubts in her mind. Alex *would* keep his promise to her.

With the dawning of the year 1587 a period of relative quiet set in, a time when Marina and Sir Ralph got to know each other better. They quickly became close, both in a way victims of their circumstances, and it gave them something in common. The winter nights were long, and they were glad of each other's company. Ralph was very knowledgeable, and many an interesting conversation they had in front of the hall fire.

From Ralph, Marina learned much about Scottish history and politics and the folklore of his native Ayrshire. People here, she discovered, were every bit as superstitious as they were in rural Northumberland. She had noticed during her times at Monkwood that certain herbs and talismans were hung over the doorseven the barn doorsto ward off evil spirits. Ralph kept her entertained with tales about sea witches, devil crows that pecked out the eyes of the unwary, a phantom dog that on moonlight nights turned into a werewolf and roamed the Carrick Hills, and lots of other spine-tingling stories. Then there were the real-life smugglers who hid in caves along the coast, and thieving bands of tinkers who roamed the moors. An interesting tale that was based in reality concerned the Vikings who long ago had attacked and then settled along the coast of Scotland.

"That's the reason you see so many people here with flaxen hair and bright blue eyes," said the old

man. "But what you *never* want to see is King Haco's ghost ship."

"Why? What of it?" Marina asked, fascinated.

"Well, because it's a portent of doom. You see, Haco died before he could return to Norway, so his ship is destined to sail these waters forever, and to spy it sailing in the Firth is a warning that great danger is near; danger either to yourself or someone close to you."

It was fun to listen to these stories while safe and sound inside the thick walls of the house, comfortably settled before a roaring fire.

They amused themselves in other ways too. Both enjoyed a game of chess and both played to win. On Marina's seventeenth birthday on February third Sir Ralph presented her with a beautifully wrought ivory and ebony chess set, together with a length of scarlet satin for a new gown.

But she didn't receive the gift she most desired a visit from Alex.

By this time Ralph had a good idea how it was with the young couple or how it *had* been though he never pried. He noticed, though, the way Marina's eyes lit up whenever his grandson's name came up in the conversation, and he found it heartrending. The old knight fumed inwardly. Young men, he thought, were so shallow, so fickle, flitting from one woman to another. He wished Alex could see the girl now. With her features returned to normal, Marina was a stunningly lovely girl with her rippling wheat-colored hair and dark eyes that would fire a man's soul. His fingers itched to wring Alexander's neck.

While Ralph was resting, Marina took to wandering the hills and seashore. Beautiful as the scenery was, she was blind to it, crushed by the misery lying heavy inside her. Oh, God, why, *why* didn't he write? It had

been weeks now. She tried not to let it, but Garth and Elsie's remarks began to take on real significance now. Surely Alex couldn't have been so busy that he couldn't at least have written a brief note to tell her that he was all right. Had something unforeseen happened with his family or clan, or, God forbid, him! Terrified by the thought, Marina flew home to question Sir Ralph, fear for her lover overcoming her pride.

"If anything had happened we'd have heard about it," the old man assured her, patting her hand. "The countess would have let me know."

"What of Walsingham?" Marina was pale with agitation. "Alex?"

"Nay, nay." Ralph shook his head firmly. "Alexander has nothing to fear from the English secret police here. Scotland is out of their jurisdiction and they wouldn't dare trespass here. Alex" he hesitated, trying to think of a way to let her down easily "has never been much of a correspondent."

"Then I shall write to *him*!" the worried girl announced.

Cairnmore frowned and shook his head. If he knew his grandson, his family would have been kept in the dark about Marina, and in a way that was best. If a letter arrived at Castle Augusta from an unknown English woman, and happened to be opened by a secretary, as sometimes happened when the person it was addressed to was out, it would only stir up a hornets' nest. Even if it was placed directly into Alexander's hands it would cause speculation among the servants . . . and quickly reach the ears of the earl and countess. They would want to know about any mail arriving from Cairnmore House they might even worry that his own illness had worsened! But one

thing was certain, they would find out the truth soon enough. There were few secrets in the great houses, thanks to the servants.

"Hang on a little longer," he advised Marina lamely, adding irritably, "But don't worry about Alex, he's fine. That one is like a cat; he always lands on his feet."

One afternoon Marina climbed the Carrick Hills to her favorite lookout point with its magnificent view of the bay, curious sheep closing in around her. Far below, the water glittered greenish-silver, and the sky above was a cold, wintry bluelike her heart, she thought glumly. She gazed bleakly to the hills of the mysterious island of Arran; they were a soft mauve in the faint mist hanging over the water, their crests crowned with snow. Flocks of gulls followed the fishing craft that left the town of Ayr every morning in search of the great shoals of herring and cod, returning in the evening to sell off their catches at the fish auctions if they returned at all, considering the changeable nature of these often turbulent waters.

Marina sat down for a few minutes to rest, breathing in deeply. The air was clean and salty, and a light breeze ruffled her long golden hair, sending it flying up around her head and coloring her cheeks a bright pink. Outwardly she was glowing with health, her skin soft and flawless, her eyes clear, but inside her all was dark. "Alex!" Marina cried aloud in anguish. "Oh Alex, have mercy! A few lines . . . all I ask is a few lines, my love . . ."

Suddenly she sat forward, her eyes narrowing as she detected a strange-looking ship far to the north, sailing into the Firth of Clyde from the direction of the island of Skye and the Cumbraes. There was

something peculiar about that ship, something different from all the others dotting the water as it glided in and out of the fog that hung

over the sea. Marina imagined that she saw a high curving prow ending in some sort of carved ornamentperhaps a bird. She saw billowing sails and the rhythmic dipping of oars along the side, then with a start spied the figure of a tall warlord in a glittering helmet.

"My God . . ." she whispered, her blood turning to ice when she realized what it was. The next instant the Norse galley vanished in the mist.

Marina jumped to her feet and peered after it, then raced back to Cairnmore House. "I've seen King Haco's ghost ship!" she cried as she ran into the hall. "Oh, Sir Ralph, I'm not jesting. I swear I saw it sailing in the Firth." She clutched the back of the old man's chair, almost swooning. "Something awful has happened, or is about to happen. Alex! 'Tis Alex!" She burst into terrified tears.

"Nonsense!" Cairnmore gripped her hand fiercely, alarmed as all the color drained from her face as if it had been sucked out of her. "Nonsense," he repeated firmly, "'twas only a trick of the light. The tale about Haco's ship is mere superstition and not meant to be taken seriously. Get a grip on yourself!" he ordered quite harshly, afraid she was about to succumb to an attack of hysteria. "Educated people don't believe such rubbish, and you, miss, are an educated girl."

"Oh, but"

"Listen to me, it was an illusion, nothing more. I'll tell you no more folk tales if you are going to take them seriously. For goodness sake, Marina, have you lost your wits?"

But there was something that Sir Ralph had never

told her, and he was glad he hadn't now. He himself had glimpsed the ghost ship a week before his wife, Alicia, had died. He decided he would write to Castle Augusta posthaste. Garth could mail the letter.

10

They had taken him out of Scotland illegally and brought him back to England to stand trial for his crime, and during the weeks he had been incarcerated in the Tower of London, Alexander Sinclair had gained the dubious reputation of being the most difficult prisoner in the fortress. He had paced about in his cell like a caged lion, rattled the bars of the window, trying to dislodge them, then pounded the door

until the warden feared he would break it down. Twice he had had to be moved to more secure quarters, and on one occasion they had stripped him naked and chained him to the wall, feeding him nothing but bread and water, thus weakening him, until Alex became more tractable. And, like most of the others, he had spent harrowing times in the torture chambers, though they had stopped short of putting him on the rack. Why, Alex would never know.

For all his efforts, Alexander didn't succeed in escaping from the Tower of London. Few had, and none without outside help. No one could intervene for Sinclair for the simple reason that none of his people knew where he was. All they knew was that he seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth.

Finally, the day of his trial arrived. In a Tower courtroom Alex and his friend James Fraser faced their accusers in turn. As the higher ranking of the two, Alex was first. He stood unflinching as a list of his crimes were read out to him. He had, they charged, led a conspiracy to free Queen Mary of Scotland, a woman who herself had plotted constantly against the Crown of England. He was also accused of conspiring to depose and kill Queen Elizabeth and put the Scottish Queen on her throne, and by so doing to reinstate the Catholic religion in England.

"What say you to these grave charges, my lord Sinclair?" asked Justice Hull.

"Most of them are lies."

"Indeed? You deny attempting to free the Scottish Queen?"

"That I admit," Alex allowed. "The rest are untrue."

"Sir, that one crime would naturally lead to the others," purred Lord Hull.

"I do not consider it to be a crime to try to free a woman wrongfully imprisoned for nineteen years," Alex said loudly, his green eyes flashing with indignation. "I confess only to attempting to make right a great wrong done to an anointed Queen of Scotland, and I leave the *world* to judge if that was indeed a crime not the biased ministers of this courtroom."

The judges looked at each other uneasily and muttered among themselves, well aware of the attitude of the rest of the world in this matter but annoyed at

being reminded of it.

The proceedings dragged on, but try as they might, the judges could not get Alex to confess to the other charges brought against him, and in the end he was taken back to his cell to await the verdict.

He was not the same man who had entered the Tower many weeks before. Rough treatment, scanty nourishment, and lack of fresh air and exercise had wrought a great change in him. His once strong, muscular body had grown thin, his face was pale and gaunt, but his green eyes were as fierce and defiant as ever, burning with indignation when he reviewed how he had been treated. He had been kidnapped from his own country and brought to England illegally. He had been allowed no counsel of his own choosing at his trial. And his family had not been informed of it nor indeed knew where he was. Everything had been shrouded in secrecy.

The verdict was brought to Alex the next morning. He had been found guilty on all counts and was sentenced to die on February twentieth.

"By what manner?" he asked.

"You are to go to the block."

When left alone, Alex lay back on his pallet. He supposed he should consider himself lucky. Anthony Babington and *his* plotters had all been hanged, cut down before death and revived, then drawn and quartered the vicious traitor's death, though not just reserved for traitors, as Alex well knew.

It surprised Alex that he had not been condemned to that same grim fate, just as it had surprised him that he hadn't been racked in the torture chambers, as most others in his position had. The thought flickered through his mind that somebody, somewhere, had shown him a touch of mercy.

But . . . he was to die.

It was difficult for one so brimming with life to digest the fact that soon his life would be extinguished. Every cell in Alex's body shrieked in protest at the thought of being cut down in the flower of his youth and suddenly he remembered his grandfather saying that for every action there is a reaction, a remark that assumed deadly significance now.

This then, he sighed, was where his youthful folly had led him to the block. It horrified Alex to think that he might die for naught, if indeed, as Ralph Cairnmore maintained, Mary Stuart had been determined all along to sacrifice her life as a martyr for her religion.

He thought of his family and of Marina, the girl he loved. He considered all that might have been and was now denied him . . . because of his own actions. Alex sprang up and went to the tiny window of his cell, his hands gripping the bars until they turned white. "Dear God," he muttered, "don't let it all have been in vain!" He must go to his death believing that he would die in a good cause; that Queen Mary truly desired her freedom.

Alex was deeply worried about his family and how this might affect them. It was difficult to predict how King James might react once he learned of the plot to free his mother, a woman in essence a stranger to him and in some ways even a threat to his crown. Then there was the Anglo-Scottish alliance to consider, an alliance dear to the heart of the King, just as it was to his English cousin Elizabeth. Nay, he brooded, James might not look with favor on the rescue attempt.

Somehow he must warn his father, the Earl of Belrose. If the King took this ill, the Sinclair lands could well be forfeited, his father's titles attainted, all he possessed taken away through the actions of his son.

A feeling of desperation seized Alex to think that his sire was totally unaware of the danger rushing toward his house. Even the whereabouts of his own son was unknown to him, since everything that had happened had been shrouded in secrecy.

He must try to bribe one of the guards to sneak a letter out of the Tower and back to his family. These men, poorly paid, were ever susceptible to graft. Alex picked up his leather jerkin and tore out the padded lining to get at funds he had hidden there, then banged on the door of his cell to attract attention, painfully aware that he didn't have much time left and Castle Augusta was a long way away.

Eight days before, on February first, Secretary William Davison brought Queen Elizabeth a bundle of papers to sign.

There was nothing unusual about that. Davison, Secretary to the Council, frequently came with documents requiring the royal signature. Elizabeth, seeing him hesitating by the door, waved him forward and held out her hand for them impatiently, thinking that these were the last she would attend to that day. She was weary and

in need of relaxation and refreshment.

Then she saw the expression on Davison's face. He stood before her white and tense, beads of perspiration gleaming on his forehead. His hand shook when he placed the folder on her desk, and when he raised his head he didn't quite meet her eye.

Queen Elizabeth's heart lurched sickeningly. Instantly she knew what he was about, and at the thought of it her face turned chalk-white, her nerves screaming. This was a game of deception, but one in which both sides knew the rules; it was a ghastly charade her ministers had decided to play out for the appeasement of Her Majesty's delicate conscience.

The Queen knew that as well as they did.

She played her part well. None of her inner turmoil showed as she gazed down at the document lying on top of the pile placed before her. Innocent enough, that one! Quickly she scrawled her signature to it and turned to the next, and the next. Midway through the stack there it was, a paper she had been dreading to see for the past nineteen long years.

Set squarely before her was Mary Stuart's death warrant.

Elizabeth hesitated, her mind reeling, the hand holding the quill turned to lead. She cried inwardly, "Could they not have spared me this hated responsibility? Could Sir Amyas Paulet, her jailor, not have taken my hint and quietly poisoned her instead?" But no, Paulet had written back in horror at the suggestion, saying, "God forbid, I could not make such a shipwreck of my conscience or leave such a blot on my posterity by shedding her blood without law or warrant."

The pompous fool! The self-righteous prig! And what of *my* conscience? the Queen fumed. What of the blot *I* would leave to posterity if I went through with this and I a Queen!

Davison waited breathlessly, his heart thudding. The silence in the chamber was excruciating as Elizabeth sat with her head bent over the warrant, the hand clutching the quill poised. Oh, the weight of it! she groaned, the horror of having to be the one to officially sanction her execution. But . . . there could be no more delays, no more fresh plots to free her, no more turmoil in England caused by her cousin Mary Stuart a woman who would have seized *her* crown if she could. Elizabeth firmly believed that. Now her ministers were adamant. They

were no longer willing to let her procrastinate. Finally and the Queen had

to face it at last there was no one else prepared to take this matter out of her hands. The responsibility was hers alone.

She scrawled her signature on the death warrant.

Then she slumped back in her chair and turned her head away, ignoring the man who snatched it up without comment and hurriedly left her chamber. In the anteroom outside the other ministers were waiting, and Elizabeth could hear them rejoicing that the matter was concluded at long last. She sat on alone, suddenly hating them all. They seemed to her like carefree children while she felt so doleful and old. She could have liked Mary, she was certain . . . had they not both been Queens in the same small island, with one of them a little more entitled to wear the crown than the other, and therein lay the crux of it.

Within the hour the death warrant was winging its way to Fotheringay Castle in Northamptonshire before Queen Elizabeth had a chance to change her mind, as she was frequently wont to do. Her ministers were taking no chances, anxious as they were to dispatch with the one they considered to be England's greatest enemy.

At eight o'clock on the morning of February eighth in the year 1587, the tall, stately figure of a Queen walked courageously to her death in the Great Hall of Fotheringay Castle, condemned by another Queen who was also her relative.

Mary Stuart suffered severely from arthritis, the legacy of years spent in dank English prisons, but as she stepped into the hall she tried hard not to limp. At sight of her a hush fell over the assembly gathered to watch the proceedings. There were few Scots among them, few friends of Mary Stuart, but even so, as every eye turned toward her, many of

them were deeply moved.

Gone was the beautiful young girl who had once ruled Scotland, a vivacious girl with boundless energy who loved to dance and sing, to ride, hunt, to laugh and flirt with her courtiers. Years of captivity had changed her drastically and depressed her bright spirit, thickened her once slim body, and atrophied her limbs. But her fierce courage shone forth as radiantly as ever that morning as she glanced at the silent

crowd gathered to witness her demise. Many looked down when those amber eyes touched them, unable to conceal their emotion.

The Queen was dressed in a black gown and wore a white veil on her head. She was accompanied by those of her most faithful servants and ministers who had been permitted to stay with her to the end. From the spectators the Queen glanced at the dais where the block, the axe, and the two executioners were waiting; then, her white face inscrutable, her lips moved in prayer.

In these last moments of her life the Dean of Peterborough, a Protestant, harried her to change her religion, but Mary shook her head. From the dais she spoke calmly but strongly in a voice that carried throughout the vast hall.

"I was born into the Catholic religion and will die in it. I am settled in the ancient religion, sir, and mean to spend my blood in defense of it."

Her black gown was removed and the veil lifted off her head, then her eyes were bound. Mary knelt before the block in her crimson petticoat, but in her last moment she was not alone. Her tiny pet dog had scurried unnoticed under the voluminous folds of her skirt and now lay snuggled close with his head resting on her legs, her last comfort on earth.

The axe fell and the forty-four years of her turbulent life passed into history.

William Davison, Secretary to the Council, was arrested and thrown into the Tower. Terrified after the fact at what she had done, Queen Elizabeth made Davison the scapegoat. His crime? He was charged with exceeding his authority in delivering the warrant to Fotheringay so quickly. Elizabeth admitted that she had signed it she could hardly deny it since her signature was on the document but now she swore that she had never intended it to be delivered to Fotheringay, or for her Scottish cousin to be executed.

In this vein she sat down and wrote a long, impassioned letter to King James, referring to the "dreadful accident" that had befallen his royal mother, insisting that she had had no part in bringing about Mary's death. "I beseech you," she wrote, "that as God and so many more know how innocent I am in this case . . ."

The King wrote back saying he hoped she could "persuade the whole world of the same," the tone of his letter heavily cynical.

Within hours of learning of Queen Mary's beheading the whole of Scotland was in an uproar. The people marched from every village and hamlet into Edinburgh, howling in fury that King James had not done more to save his mother. He should have broken off the alliance, they cried; then Elizabeth would have been forced to spare the Queen. When darkness fell, vast mobs surged through the capital brandishing torches and screaming for justice, an eerie glow lighting up the night sky, a great dull roar like thunder even penetrating the castle itself.

High above the city of Edinburgh the King trembled in his fortress.

James was twenty years old, shorter in stature than either of his parents, with reddish-fair hair and serious gray eyes. In describing him to his royal mistress the English ambassador wrote, "He is middling of aspect but his countenance is lit with the lamp of a keen mind." Now, clad in a deep purple mourning robe, James went through the motions of weeping for his mother, a mother he had never been given the chance to love or indeed even know. His favorite courtiers, who were with him, watched and waited to see what he would do.

James stalked about his room, sorely troubled, for as well as the calamity that had befallen his mother he had also learned that day that the son of one of his most important nobles was at that moment under sentence of death in the Tower of London. His crime? An attempt to free Mary Stuart!

At the window of the privy chamber the Earl of Huntly, the young George Gordon, glanced down at the street beyond the castle grounds where the angry throng had congregated to yell abuse at the King. "Their numbers are swelling, Your Grace," he said, and added with a touch of relish, for there was nothing Gordon enjoyed more than a fight, "Methinks they mean rebellion."

This chief of the Gordon clan was as changeable and unpredictable as his grandfather who had ruled their clan in the time of Mary Stuart, but the King had an affection for Huntly, even though he was a Catholic. Huntly warned, "If on top of this Elizabeth kills Alexander Sinclair, then rebellion it will be for certain."

James stopped pacing. "I dispatched a letter to Queen Elizabeth about this matter the moment I received news of it."

"A letter?" echoed the Earl of Bothwell, nephew of

the Bothwell who had briefly been married to the dead Queen. His lip curled scornfully and, pointing at the King's mourning robe, he said, "You would do well to exchange that garment you are wearing for a suit of armor and ride at the head of an army into London town, for 'tis sure that would stand better in the eyes of your people."

James eyed twenty-four-year-old Bothwell with distaste, though there had been a time that he had liked him greatly. But Bothwell had grown arrogant and overproud and fallen into the dangerous habit of telling him, the King, what to do. "By the rood, man," James said, " 'tis well for Scotland that a cooler head than thine will prevail to guide us through this dark hour. Ride at the head of an army!" he sneered. "Killing and bloodshed are ever your solutions to problems. Will that undo the deed that has already been done or bring my mother back? Will it, indeed, benefit Scotland? This country has been at peace for some long while now, when in the past peace had been a stranger to it. Nay, Bothwell, for in the end my people would not thank me for plunging them into a war with England."

"What of Sinclair?" George Gordon persisted. Alex was one of his dearest friends and he himself was quite prepared to march south if the King was agreeable. He had already spoken to the Earl of Belrose, Alex's father, and promised him his full support. Gordon was the most important Catholic nobleman in Scotland with a huge clan at his command.

But the King waved his hand in exasperation. Why, he wondered, had he to be surrounded with such hotheads when his own head was so cool? He liked Alex Sinclair as much as the others, but Alex was only one man, and his duty as King was to think and act for the good of his entire country. Just the same, he asked

himself if the letter he had written to his English cousin might have been a little more forceful. Sinclair was now a hero as far as the people were concerned, while his own image was tarnished, and if Alex were to go to the block . . .

James threw himself down behind his desk and in his own hand wrote another, more ominous, letter to the English Queen; there was a threat in that letter that hadn't been in the former, but even so, James by this time better understood the nature of his English kinswoman. He knew she might well ignore it. She was a woman, he had learned, who refused to be dictated to, not even by a King. And cunning as she was, she could say that she had never received the letter at all, or that she

hadn't received it in time to save Alexander Sinclair. He knew the workings of her devious mind, and that it was common practice in England to set a date for an execution, then suddenly move it forward, especially with cases that might prove embarrassing to the Crown. This had happened often enough in the past. But . . . he had done his best, or as much as it was prudent to do.

"Seal this and have it delivered immediately," the King commanded a secretary.

Huntly and Bothwell were somewhat mollified, but Maitland, who was also in the room, glanced out of a window, muttering, "How to quell this unrest?"

James suddenly had an idea.

"Arrest the Master of Grey!" he ordered.

The Master of Grey had been one of the ambassadors the King had sent to England to plead for his mother's lifewhich could not have been saved short of threatening to break the alliance. Grey inevitably had failed in his mission and now became the scapegoat, the same role that the unfortunate Davison was fulfilling for Elizabeth in England. He was a figure the

people could vent their fury on in place of the King.

As they left Edinburgh Castle together, Gordon remarked to Bothwell, "We must hope that letter reaches England in time to save Alex."

Bothwell nodded. He would have liked to ride at the head of an army. Steel was more to his taste in settling disputes than paper. The King was a coward! But he, his kin, would gladly have ridden in his place. Not because he had any great love for Alexander Sinclair, but because battling rather than scribbling was the quicker way to glory.

The Constable of the Tower himself came to Alex's cell. Alex knew immediately that he was about to hear something of great importance. For a few minutes he dared to hope. Freedom! He was going to be released! In his mind, he saw himself leaving his hated prison and riding furiously out of London and England itself, back to the beautiful mountains and moorlands of his home, to the blessed tranquillity of

the Highlands which until now he had never fully appreciated and once there never to set foot south of the border again.

"There has been a change," the Constable informed him. "You are to be executed at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Prepare yourself."

The door of the cell clanged shut, and again he was alone.

Alex fell back on his pallet. Prepare himself? How exactly did a man prepare himself to die, the more so a man who had scarcely yet lived? He thought of the

farewell letter he had written to his family. Had they received it? Now he would never know. He had wanted to write to Marina also, but the guard had taken everything he had, including his jerkin, as a bribe to send that one letter, and his family had to be warned of the danger they were in. Alex was confident that his grandfather would look after Marina, and that brought him great comfort. "Ah, my love," he sighed, "that I should have to leave you so soon . . ."

They came for him a few minutes before nine the next morning. Alex, as the higher ranking of the condemned men, would die first. His request to visit Jamie Fraser so that they could say goodbye was denied.

The Queen had been adamant. There would be no public spectacle made of the conspirators this time, and the fewer who knew about it the better. Sinclair and Fraser, she decreed, would be beheaded in the yard of the Tower.

Alex walked out into the courtyard with a firm step and displayed no sign of fear. To the small group of witnesses watching him he seemed proud and unrepentant, his dark head held high. He was satisfied that the speech he had written and would deliver before he died would do honor to his clan and Scotland, if not his King. Though his young face was haggard and thin, his brilliant green eyes were as bold as ever as he defiantly scanned the group assembled to see his sentence carried out. This too, he thought bitterly, would be conducted in secret.

During his captivity Alex had had little sleep and only the barest nourishment, and even that scarcely fit to eat, and as he mounted the steps to the block he suddenly felt light-headed and was forced to grip the rail and pause for a moment to steady himself.

In that instant his whole life flashed before him. He

saw, vividly, the much loved faces of his parents and brothers and sisters and scenes from his happy childhood growing up at Castle Augusta surrounded by his clan. Then into his mind came a pair of melting brown eyes, and he heard a soft voice saying, "No one could have freed Queen Mary. You *tried*, Alexander, and that alone marks you as one of the bravest men in the land."

He straightened his shoulders and continued on up the steps, thinking, Don't let that courage fail me now . . . and don't let this all have been for naught.

Alex delivered his speech in a loud, ringing voice, his eyes not on the hostile faces below him in the courtyard but on the bright blue sky above the Tower battlements, his last sight before they blindfolded him.

As he knelt before the block, his whole being shrieked inwardly, "I want to live! I want to live!"

But he said nothing.

A tense hush fell over the witnesses, and for a moment nothing happened. Alex waited, his heart pounding like thunder in his ears. Then the executioner swung high his axe.

There came sounds of a great commotion and shouting from a door leading into the Tower. Men erupted from that door and feet thudded across the cobbles and up the steps to the platform, and the executioner was thrust rudely aside. Hands reached to wrench Alex to his feet and his blindfold was whipped off. Blinking, the young nobleman stared into the red, sweating face of the Constable.

"Reprieved!" the man shouted at him, waving a document in his face. "Reprieved by this warrant signed by our most merciful sovereign."

Alex was in shock and made no response.

The Constable grabbed him by the arm and shook

him, crying, "Ye are not to die, Sinclair, can ye not understand that? Ye are not to die!"

But neither was he to be freed.

Alex was returned to his cell, there to await the Queen's pleasure. The

Tower was full of prisoners awaiting the same thing, some for more than twenty years, among them many who wished they had suffered the quicker fate instead of being made to pine slowly away in captivity.

By the beginning of March the snow had vanished and the buds of new leaves swelled in the trees. Crocuses in yellow, purple, and bluish-pink massed in cheery clumps in the garden of Cairnmore House, and the birds began to preen and sing, trembling and fluttering in anticipation of the mating season. They could smell the earth stirring, and Sir Ralph's thoughts turned to spring and the new planting season. He announced at the breakfast table, "After the meal I must go down and see what's happening in the greenhouse. Now is the time for new seeds and plants to be ordered."

Marina gave him a doubtful look as they waited for the serving girl to bring in the meal. "You must take care not to tire yourself."

"I feel fit as a fiddle!" The old knight laughed with a glance out the window to the gentle sunshine, but he whispered, "Say naught to Beech about this, mind. I won't have him spoiling this bonny day with his fussing."

Fay, a rosy-cheeked table maid brought in the meal. "Good morn to you both," she said with a smile. Setting a steaming platter of mutton stew on the table, she lifted off the lid of the dish and sniffed appreciatively, "Ah . . . now that does smell tasty!"

The instant Marina smelled the food, her stomach

lurched and she knew she was going to be sick. Jumping up, she made a wild dash out of the room and upstairs to her own chamber where she hung over the washbowl vomiting until her empty stomach tightened painfully inside her and her whole body was drenched with a clammy cold sweat. Then she collapsed on her bed, weeping. She was heartbroken.

The incident might have received more attention had not Sir Ralph himself taken ill later that morning. He was puttering about his greenhouse when he suffered a stroke, which left him paralyzed down his left side. For a week he lay near death in his room, oblivious to Marina, his son and daughter-in-law anxiously hovering over him. Then, though he was still gravely ill, he rallied a little.

One day when she was alone with him he struggled to speak.

"Don't . . . leave me, Marina. Stay, won't you . . . lass?"

"Aye, of course I will," she promised, and leaned over to kiss his wan cheek. "I wouldn't dream of leaving you, Sir Ralph."

His sunken eyes were dark with worry. "Theythey might try to send you away."

Marina pressed his hand, soothing, "Nay, nay, you mustn't fret. Nothing could tear me away from you, dearling. Now don't speak any more for 'tis tiring you. I'll stay beside you, never fear."

It wasn't an easy promise to keep, through no fault of her own. Garth and Elsie were constant visitors to the house now and their sharp eyes were turned to their own advantage, both determined to guard their interests. They no longer concealed the fact that they resented Marina and would have liked her out of the house. Whenever they found her in Ralph's room they coldly ordered her downstairs, reminding her that

Beech had been hired to look after the knight and she must not interfere.

On the way home from one of these visits Elsie Cairnmore worried aloud, "Your father is far too attached to that girl! What if he has already made provision for her with his lawyer? Would you stand by and see aa foreigner snatch away what is rightfully ours?"

"Elsie," her husband interrupted with a sigh, "my father would never do wrong by us; he is not that kind of man. We will get what we are due, dinna fash yourself."

"Aye, but mayhap not *all* we are due because of that wench!"

She was driving the cart as she always did, whether or not she had a passenger, including her husband. Now, shifting the reins to one hand, she caught Garth's arm with the other, hissing, "I tell you, she must be got out of there! You listen to me; you know I am never wrong, and I have this strong feeling that we'll be diddled by that upstart." Her bright little eyes narrowed and she went on in a lower tone, "There's the powder kept in the stables. We can have Beech see to it that a wee bit of it finds its way into her food"

"You doited fool!" It was rare that Garth challenged his goodwife, but now he felt it warranted, and he could be firm when he needed to be.

Glaring at her red face, he went on, "I declare, you would see us both hanged on the Muir of Ayr, and I for one am happy with the length of my neck the way it is. We'll get rid of the wench," he stated determinedly, "but it must be done right, with no danger to us. I've already asked Beech to try to find her a post in another house."

"She's a lady," sneered Elsie. "Your father would never allow her to soil her hands."

"My father is too ill to know what's happening," he replied.

In the end it was Beech who found a way.

Sipping a mid-morning cup of ale with the staff in the kitchen, he pricked up his ears when he heard Fay remark that Mistress Marina was taking the master's illness very hard. In fact, she said, the lass was frequently sick herself and had taken an aversion to her food. "She near-fainted at the breakfast yin morning, and the color o' her face . . . !"

The housekeeper frowned. "It sounds more to me like she's pupped."

This conversation was immediately reported to Monkwood.

First thing the next morning Elsie arrived in her cart. Almost dragging Marina out of the master's bedchamber, she thrust her into the library and closed the door.

"Ye're breeding, are ye not?" the older woman challenged.

The girl's face crumbled and she turned very pale. For weeks nowthough all the signs had been thereMarina had not allowed herself to believe it. Now, with Elsie Cairnmore staring her squarely in the eye demanding the truth, she could no longer delude herself. She was going to have Alexander's child! And she confronted another bitter truth thenshe would never see him again. Not once had he come to visit her in all these months or even written her a letter. He had no more interest in her, that was plain. All she had meant to Sinclair was one more brief adventure.

"Well, mistress?" Elsie prompted. "What do ye have to say for yourself?"

Marina covered her face with her hands and wept.

Elsie was all concern then and pretended to sympa-

thize, clucking at her and patting her hand. She said, "That husband o' yours will be sorry now, I dinna doubt. He's done himself out o' a bonny wee son or daughter. But at least," she hurried on slyly when Marina opened her mouth to tell her the truth, "the bairn will have a name. 'Twill not come into this world a bastard, thank the blessed Lord!" And she shuddered theatrically at the idea. "Now, that *would* have been dreadful."

Elsie had a very good notion of who the father was, but it suited her purpose to ignore it, to make Marina believe that she thought the child was Stafford's. Further, she was determined to convince the girl of the wisdom of that too, and went on, "The bairn will be able to hold up its head, and so will you, hen, so there's naught to worry about on that score. But listen, lass"she leaned forward conspiratorially" 'tis best to keep this a secret for now, do ye understand?"

Marina nodded emphatically. The last thing she wanted to do was tell anyone.

"Good! Just dinna breathe a word about it, especially to Sir Ralph. The old gent would have another stroke. And never fear, I'll arrange everything for when the time comes and will help ye all I can."

Marina stared at her through her tears, terribly ashamed now for her uncharitable thoughts about Elsie. She clutched her hand, aware that Elsie was a woman who could be depended upon to get things done. "If you knew how miserable I've been! H-how can I ever thank you?"

"You just leave things to me, Marina. I'll do the right thing by you and the bairn. Leave things to me . . ."

The goodwife returned to Monkwood in great spirits and immediately sought out her husband so that she could dictate her next move. Naturally, she had it

already all thought out.

Marina felt slightly better after speaking to Garth's wife. How surprising, she reflected, that Elsie would turn out to be the one to help her. Elsie! She was sorry for having been so quick to dislike the woman, but then Marina had discovered of late that she wasn't a very good judge of character. Never, never had she dreamed that Alexander

would let her down and break his promise. Not Alex! He had been all that was shining, noble, and near-perfect in her eyes and she had trusted him implicitly. "Fool!" Marina moaned aloud. "Oh, you gullible fool!" Even Edgar, for all his faults, had not pretended to be something he was not; at least he had been honest. As for Sinclair, had she not glimpsed another side to his nature that night at the Four Doves? Aye, Marina thought grimly, she had but she'd ignored it. Well . . . she could ignore it no longer. He had deceived her in the cruelest way possible and she hated him now. Hated him!

Sir Ralph's condition continued to be precarious, and as time passed he fretted, worrying about his grandson and why the Sinclairs hadn't contacted him. It wasn't like them, and the more he brooded about it, the stronger the suspicion rose in his mind that Garth hadn't sent the letter he had written to them. One day Ralph managed a word in private with his doctor, a man he knew he could trust, and asked the physician to write to the Highlands on his behalf, telling them of his illness and inquiring after Alexander. "Tell him," he instructed the doctor, "that I wish him to visit me as soon as possible, and that I'll accept no excuses."

When the doctor's letter arrived at Castle Augusta in the Scottish Highlands, the chief of the clan, the Earl of Belrose, was still in London trying to negotiate for Alexander's release from the Tower, so far with no

success. Queen Elizabeth told him haughtily, "You have a comely son, Sinclair. Well I remember his handsome face about my court a few years ago, though he was only a lad in his teens then. He amused me, the young rascal, strutting about, making mischief, boasting of all he would accomplish when the time came, and I laughed with the others, enjoying him." Then she had glowered. "Little did I dream that the bold deeds he meant to accomplish included snatching my crown off my head!" She went on angrily, "He came to my court for his education, and I see now that I was too lenient with him, too tolerant with the young scoundrel. Well, Earl Belrose, I am tolerant no more. Your son will now have ample time for meditation whilst languishing in the Tower, where he will remain at my pleasure. Hopefully, he will gain wisdom during his stay there."

The earl wrote back the gist of his interview with the Queen in a letter to his countess. "She is immovable, as yet," he added, "but I am, as you know, not one to give up. I could be wrong about this, Alyssa, but deep down I sense that the Queen still harbors some fondness for Alex.

I think she realizes that there's no evil in him, that his deed was more one of reckless chivalry than anything else. However, my love, 'twould be wrong of me to awaken false hope in your heart. I fear there will be no early release for our son. Elizabeth has a will of iron and Alexander's crime was a grave one; he won't get off lightly if at all."

Alyssa Sinclair was forty-two years old and the mother of four sons and two daughters. A tall, elegant woman with a light frosting of silver in her titian hair, she was still a remarkably beautiful woman, a woman with a strong will and a mind of her own. As she liked to say, she would not have been where she was today through being timid and shrinking. She had known

much turbulence and hardship in her early days, though since her marriage to the Earl of Belrose, Blake Sinclair, she had been blissfully happy until recently. Now she was frantic with worry about her eldest son, Alexander, but at least he was alive, and, knowing her husband as she did, Blake would not rest until Alex was freed and restored to them.

Upon receiving the letter from Sir Ralph Cairnmore's doctor, Lady Alyssa set out for Ayrshire taking her oldest daughter with her. As they traveled down through the mountains with a large company of armed guards made up of their own faithful clansmen, Alyssa had a new worry. Sir Ralph. He was the man who had made her own mother's latter years very happy ones, and she would never forget him for that. They had known that Ralph was in failing health and because of it had thought it best not to inform him of Alexander's trouble, afraid it would upset him and make him worse, for Sir Ralph dearly loved his grandson. The latest letter from Cairnmore House was very distressing. Not only was the old man worse, but demanding to see Alex as well. What, Alyssa wondered, would she tell him when they met?

Sixteen-year-old Kirstin too was deep in thought as they rode along. She had a piece of information, given to her by her betrothed, Robert Douglas, that she had never divulged to her mother. It concerned the girl the lads had brought back from England with them, Marina Stafford. "Alex would want it kept a secret," Robert had warned her. "Mind, say nothing to your parents."

Lady Kirstin was troubled, thinking that the secret would be out once they reached Cairnmore House. Perhaps, she reasoned, it would be best to prepare her mother now. Better that than it coming as a shock.

The girl brought her horse closer to the older wo-

man's. "I have something to tell you, my lady mother."

"Oh?" Alyssa smiled at her daughter. The girl was even taller than she was and had the Sinclair dark hair and eyes. Kirstin was a pretty lass and would wed her sweetheart the following year. It pleased the countess to realize that it was a love match, not just a marriage for dynastic reasons. "Why do you blush?" she chuckled when color rose in the girl's face. "Welladay, I think I am about to hear some delicious gossip! Out with it, then. I can hardly wait," she said, amused by her daughter's expression.

Kirstin gave her a sober sidelong glance. " 'Tis about Alex."

Then it all came gushing out, leaving Alyssa stunned. "You say . . . you say they took this English girl out of her husband's charge and broughtbrought her to Cairnmore House!" She couldn't believe it. "To Sir Ralph's?"

"Aye." Kirstin swallowed. "The woman's husband nearly beat her to death. She's only young, Mother; just a young girl; the lads felt sorry for her. You see, she was desperate to get awayso they brought her to Scotland."

Alyssa didn't know what to think. She lapsed into silence, turning it over in her mind, her first thought that Alex and his friends had committed yet another crime. One minute she was furious with her son, the next, well . . . she could almost understand. She herself had been beaten near to death often enough in her youth to appreciate what the poor English lass must have felt like, and Alex, for all his faults, had a soft heart. Something struck her then. "Kirstin, the lass must be wondering what has happened to Alex. Mayhap that was why Ralph demanded that he pay him a visit." She looked hard at her daughter as another

thought struck her. "There's nothing between your brother and this English girl, is there?"

Kirstin looked away. "I . . . how would I know, Mother?"

The one bright spot in Marina's life was that Sir Ralph was steadily improving. Even his doctor was pleased with his progress. Marina did as much for the old man as she could and read to him every day, and

sometimes entertained him by singing and playing the lute. Surprisingly, Garth and Elsie no longer seemed to resent her spending time with the knight: even Beech made no objections when she ministered to his needs. There was a pleasant atmosphere in the house now, even when the "Monkwood crew" came to visit. "Och, ye do him good, lass," Elsie praised. One day she took Marina aside and solicitously asked how she felt, then said, "I'm making the necessary arrangements and have the midwife all picked out. We've a cradle at Monkwood and plenty o' baby clothes on hand. Now, do ye want to breast feed, or should we start looking for a wet nurse?"

Things could have been much worse, Marina told herself when her spirits drooped, when she cried herself to sleep at night, hating Alex, yet yearning for him too. The family, the ones who knew about her condition, were rallying around. And Elsie, dear Elsie, had been so good to her, bringing over fresh farm eggs, milk, meat, vegetables, and fresh fruit for her to eat. "You take care of yourself, now," she kept saying. "Do nothing to wear yourself out."

On a Friday night Marina and Sir Ralph were playing chess in his bedchamber when they heard a loud banging on the front door. Beech, as if on cue, flew to draw back the bolts ahead of the other servants and the new arrivals crowded into the hall. "Up

there," the valet whispered, and pointed up the stairs. "It's the second door on your right."

Then Beech scurried to hide.

Sir Ralph dropped the chess piece in his hand when he heard the sound of many feet pounding up the stairs. "Tarnation!" he cried peevishly. "If that's the Monkwood rabble come back to pester me . . ."

"Nay." Marina shook her head, her heart suddenly fluttering as she rose from sitting on the side of the bed. The Monkwood "rabble" had already visited Cairnmore House earlier that day and, since Ralph was improving, would hardly come twice. But it had to be *someone* in the family or at the very least close friends for the servants to risk opening the main door in the dark of night. Many robbers roamed the countryside and this property was secluded, so no one was admitted unless well known to the family. No, Marina reasoned, a sudden flush of excitement flooding her cheeks, whoever had opened the door to the visitors must know them well.

Alex! Who else could it be but Alexander and his friends? It was

typical of Sinclair to barge into the house like this when least expected, bringing the other lads with him. So . . . he had come back for her just as he'd promised he would! Marina was deeply ashamed of herself now for having doubted him, vowing it would never happen again.

She turned to face the door, her heart thumping, desperate hope in her eyes, and instinctively put a hand on her stomach where the new life was growing inside her, wondering how Alex would react to the news that he was going to be a father. Oh, what wondrous relief to know that her love would be beside her when her time came, that her baby would have the affection and protection of a young, vigorous sire!

Marina took an eager step forward as the bedroom

door banged open and she froze. Edgar Stafford stood there, twelve armed henchmen behind him. At the sight of her husband, Marina's eyes widened in shock, a sickening lurch of disappointment almost crushing the breath from her lungs. "You!" she gasped, horror ballooning up inside her like a dark, poisonous cloud, the joy and anticipation she'd felt only a moment before instantly extinguished in her heart. For an instant she felt stupefied wondering how in God's name he had found her, then came a bounding surge of terror when she realized the predicament she was in.

Edgar gestured to her grimly. "Come with me, woman. You'll pay dearly for all the trouble you have caused me."

"Nay!" Marina screamed, even as Sir Ralph sat bolt upright against his pillows, roaring with surprising strength, "What means this intrusion? Get out of my house, knave! You are in Scotland now and . . ."

But Stafford ignored the old man and marched boldly into the bedchamber, waving for his men to follow, ducking adroitly when Marina seized a heavy brass candlestick off the mantel and hurled it at him with all her strength, then fled to the other side of the huge tester bed, placing it between herself and her husband.

Ralph Cairnmore tried to protect Marina. He struggled from his bed and made a valiant attempt to reach his weapons rack on the wall, yelling for his servants to come to his aid. But Tar, Stafford's squire, struck him a vicious blow to the side of the head with the butt of his pistol, then tossed his unconscious body back on the bed, and Edgar grabbed his wife.

Screaming, Marina fought with him desperately, biting, scratching, kicking with all her might as if fighting for her very life. Death, she thought, was

preferable to returning to England and a miserable existence as a prisoner inside dour Baxton Hall. The thought of her innocent baby being born there almost drove her mad.

Even as she wrenched at Stafford's beard and bit the stubby fingers trying to grip her, Marina thought bitterly of Alexander Sinclair, the man who had used her, discarded her, and carelessly left her to her fate, and her hapless baby with her. Oh, God, how she hated Sinclair at that moment. And what a senseless fool she had been to allow herself to be so readily taken in. Because of Sinclair she and her child were now at the mercy of a monster, a man who would take steps to see that she never slipped away from him again.

After a moment or two of trying to subdue her, the enraged husband caught Marina by the shoulders and banged her head against the wall, knocking her out. Then he threw her over his shoulder, crying to his men, "Let us depart," and they all hurried out of the room behind their master, even more nervous and anxious to leave this house and Scotland than he was.

The house servants cowered behind large pieces of furniture downstairs, terrified and confused at what was happening, but Beech had concealed himself at the other end of the house, closed up inside a broom cupboard. Against thirteen brawny men armed with pistols and daggers, the staff felt helpless. All they could do was peep mutely from their hiding places as Marina was carried out of Cairnmore House and tossed over the back of a horse, and in minutes the kidnappers were thundering away into the night in the direction of England.

Garth and Elsie arrived later to be told by Beech that Sir Ralph was dead. Garth gathered all the servants in the hall and issued instructions. Unbe-

knownst to them, he said gravely, they had been harboring a fugitive in Marina Stafford, a runaway wife, which could land them all in serious trouble. So, if anyone made inquiries about Marina anyone at all, he stressed they had to say that she had decided to return to her husband of her own free will once she discovered that she was pregnant with his child.

When Alyssa Sinclair finally arrived at Cairnmore House, that was the story she was given when she inquired about the English girl. "The lack of children seems to have been the cause of the trouble with the couple," Elsie told her with a sigh. "Now that she's pregnant, Marina feels certain that everything will be fine."

THE RECKONING

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North and South,
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The young women sat on the fragrant grass while the children frolicked around them. In the hot July sun the air shimmered and the daisies and clover thick in the meadow blurred in a haze of pink and white, waving gently in the breeze. Downhill a silver thread of river meandered lazily to lose itself in the dark green pine woods, and in the beech trees nearby birds sang rapturously to the cloudless blue sky.

"Marina," said Gwen Porter, fanning herself with her wide-brimmed straw hat, "we really must go to the fair. 'Tis one of the biggest events in the county. Everybody goes."

"Edgar doesn't," Marina sighed.

Her friend made a face. "Mayhap not now, but I'm told he used to. Anyway, sweeting, he'll let you go with me," Gwen said confidently. "You know how he likes my Bert and thinks highly of the Porter family. He won't refuse."

Marina wasn't so sure. She glanced away to where the children were playing, her Clare, almost three years old now, and little Bobby Porter, and hoped fervently that they would never know a moment's sadness and unhappiness in their lives; that they would always be as carefree as they were today.

She had changed a lot in the last three years, outside and in. All the promise Marina had shown as a very young girl at Chiltern Castle had now come to radiant fruition. Her body was supple and shapely, her smooth skin glowed, and her thick golden-blond hair seemed lit by pale fire in the bright afternoon sunshine. To her friend Gwen Porter

she was the most beautiful creature she had ever laid eyes on, and Gwen thought it was a dreadful waste that Marina had to be tied to grumpy, elderly Edgar Stafford. To Gwen's way of thinking she should have been married to a prince, just like in the fairy tales. In a way, Gwen worshiped Marina, who was everything she herself was not a refined lady, educated and cultured, and lovely enough to take one's breath away. As for herself, well . . . she was coarse oats by comparison, she often thought. She had been born a farmer's daughter and now was a farmer's wife, uneducated, uncultured, and far from bonny with her plump body and mud-brown eyes and hair, yet for all that quite content with her stout, good-natured husband and sturdy little boyfar happier than the tragic Marina, for all her many outstanding qualities.

Oh, it was a terrible shame and sometimes made the warmhearted Gwen quite angry. "Marina deserves so much better," she had remarked more than once to Bert. "So much better! If only something could be done about it . . ."

"Now, now, lass, enough of that," her husband had cautioned. "Things are what they be, and let that be

an end to it." But he added tenderly, hugging this woman he loved so much for all *her* outstanding qualities, "You are just a foolish romantic, my girl. Life is nothing like the pretty tales you used to listen to at your mother's knee, and you ought to realize that by now."

But there was a stubbornness in Gwenher only fault as far as her husband was concerned and she stoutly maintained, "Nay, Bert, I still say that Marina deserves a better life than she's getting now with that mean old weasel"

"Keep your nose out of it, woman!" he warned. "We want no trouble with Edgar Stafford."

The two women had been friends almost from the time that Marina returned to Baxton Hall, and the Porters were their closest neighbors. There had been Porters at Brokenbridge Farm just as long as Staffords had resided at the Hall, and the two families had always been friendly and supported each other during times of danger or distress. Like her mother and grandmother before her, Gwen was a midwife, so it was natural that Edgar Stafford should turn to her when the time came for his wife to give birth. It astounded Marina that Edgar had managed to convince himself that Clare was his baby, and he would hear nothing

to the contrary. After the child was born he said, "You have done your duty, wife, and I shall trouble you in the bedchamber no longer. But there is one thing you should know. Never think of leaving me again! If you do, it will be the last you will ever see of the little one."

Marina believed him. She was trapped.

He never hit her again or touched her in any way. To his way of thinking, he had the heir he had longed for for forty years and the birth of Clare gave him status. He basked in it, his manhood fully vindicated at last,

and in some ways it softened him a little; he also became slightly more sociable, anxious as he was to show off his heir. For the same reason he spent a little coin to improve the shabby appearance of his Hall and even permitted Marina to purchase cheap material at the mill to make clothes for herself and the little girl. Sometimes he even bought toys and sweetmeats for Clare, and he made a great show of spoiling her in front of others. But deep down, Marina was certain, he didn't love Clare any more than he loved her, the mother; he knew Clare wasn't his. Sometimes when she caught him watching her with her baby, Marina shivered. Edgar seemed to have overcome his violent tendencies, yet there was always that threat . . .

Had she not had her friend Gwen who knew the whole story Marina sometimes felt she would go mad.

When the children ran up demanding a tidbit, Gwen suggested, "The little ones can come with us to the fair. Think how they would enjoy that."

Marina shook her head regretfully. "He would never allow it."

"Not even if *he* came with us?" Her friend nodded in the direction of a brawny young fellow who sat perched on a fallen beech tree idly whittling a piece of wood. His name was Darby and he was Clare's bodyguard, a man who never left her side and even slept outside the door of her room at night. Stafford had also rid himself of his old retainers and hired younger, more vigorous men to watch over his property. Marina knew that her husband didn't trust her and was taking no chances.

She presented each of the children with a pear, at the same time pulling her daughter down on her knee, smiling tenderly into a pair of huge, sparkling green eyes. Soon to celebrate her third birthday, Clare

was a

beautiful child with doll-like features and glossy titian curls that already tumbled halfway down her back. Now she puckered up her tiny sugar-pink mouth and gave her mother a smacking kiss.

Marina hugged her fiercely, wishing she could take the little girl to the fair, but her husband would never allow it. Soon people would be pouring into Wilton from all over the county for the annual event, including gypsies, cutpurses, and other questionable types out to fatten their own coffers from the merrymakers. Edgar had a morbid fear of losing Clare, and with so many strangers flocking into the area he would want to keep his "daughter" safely locked up behind the newly reinforced walls of Baxton Hall.

"You still have three weeks to work on him," Gwen said with a grin. She reached to touch Clare's soft curls. "Where on earth did this glorious red hair come from?"

Marina shrugged. She had never known her own parents, but Lady Maud had once told her that her father had been dark and her Danish mother as fair as she was herself. As far as she knew, there were no redheads in the family. Even Alexander had been very dark. Alexander dear God, she never wanted to think of *him* again!

When the door of her Presence Chamber opened to admit a clerk, the Queen caught a glimpse of bright plaid garments in the crowded anteroom beyond.

"Am I never to be rid of these Sinclairs?" she cried in exasperation. "Marry, but I believe they mean to camp in that chamber yonder for the remainder of my reign."

Cecil, her Secretary of State, hid a smile. He was white-haired and stooped now, aging even faster than his royal mistress. "I fear they might, Your Grace," he

sighed. "They bring yet another petition from their King."

She had been receiving these petitions for over three years. God's blood, she railed inwardly, why couldn't they give her some peace? Had she not spared the life of that young scoundrel, Alexander? Surely they couldn't expect her to pardon him completely. Elizabeth glowered in the direction of the outer room and was suddenly awash

in self-pity. She felt like rushing out to shout at them, "Let me be! Can you not see that I'm in mourning? Why should I make you happy when I, a Queen, will never be happy again?"

Elizabeth had aged drastically in the last two years, and her temper, always quick and stinging, was now at the stage where even she found it difficult to control. All the joy and zest had gone out of her life following the death of Robert Dudley two years before, and there was hardly a moment of the day when she did not think about him. Now the only person capable of lifting her spirit even for a moment was the handsome young Earl of Essex, but Essex, as she well knew, was of a very different caliber than Robert Dudley, and considerably less tractable. As often as he made her laugh, he made her scream with anger, but either way she felt alive only when he was in her company.

It annoyed the Queen that Essex had made friends with some of these Highlanders during the time they had hung about her court ranting and raving and having the audacity to threaten to make war on her. She would fain have had them all thrown into prison, even sent to the scaffold, had Cecil not prevailed on her to stay her hand. The situation was dangerous enough as it was, he impressed on her during the times she came close to losing her head, and they dare not provoke them in any way. Elizabeth knew this well

enough, in her sane moments, but the more she saw of them, the harder it was to keep a grip on her sanity. She especially dreaded meetings with the Earl of Belrose himself.

And to think that Essex had flouted her and made friends with them! At times the nerve of Robert (his very name had endeared him to her) oft took her breath away. He had a penchant for doing the unexpected and setting himself up as a champion for lost causes, when by rights he should have been applying himself to *her* affairs instead of frittering away his time and energy on foreigners.

And now another petition from King James! That she had not expected. The King had recently married, and she had assumed that all his attention would be directed at his bride, Anne of Denmark. The Queen's heart sank. "Did my Lord Sinclair bring the petition himself?" Though Elizabeth would never have admitted it, she had become a little afraid of Blake Sinclair and found it harder and harder to meet his burning dark eyes and took great pains to see that she was never alone with him. He was a devil! And each time they met she could feel him trying to bend her to his will . . . and each time Elizabeth found it

harder to resist him. He was determined that his son would be set free. Now he was trying to tamper with her mind! Looking at him, she saw the seeds of her own destruction in his fiery dark eyes. He didn't say to her, "I beg you to set my son free," she remembered. Instead, staring at her, he said, "You *will* set my son free." Devil! Lucifer! Nay, the Queen suddenly made up her mind, she would not see Blake Sinclair again. She dare not . . .

With a start she realized that Cecil was talking to her.

The Earl of Belrose had returned to Scotland, he

said. His presence was demanded by the King on the occasion of his new Queen's coronation.

Elizabeth frowned. "But . . . that was several weeks ago. Do you mean to tell me that Sinclair has not come back here?"

Her minister nodded slowly. He seemed worried. Ominous rumors had come to his ears, he told her, which might account for the fact that the earl had not returned. " 'Tis said they will be patient no longer; that other clans are fully prepared to back them up. Now even the people clamor for the King to take action, and this time they have given James an ultimatum, saying they will listen to no more excuses from England. To them Alexander Sinclair is a hero."

The Queen felt a jolt of alarm, but she was also angry. In spite of the way she felt privately, she had always taken care to treat the Sinclairs with courtesy and respect and always promised to give each petition her full consideration while stressing that she could do nothing, of course, without the approval of her Council. She managed to imply that while *she* might be inclined to leniency, her ministers might not be so disposed. In this way she had kept them dangling, taking pains never to commit herself one way or the other, yet instilling in them that element of hope. At the same time, she made it clear that any show of armed aggression would ruin Alexander's chances of freedom.

In this way she had kept the Highlanders at bay.

"I will not be intimidated!" said the Queen. "What are they but a bunch of mountain savages."

Cecil replied quietly, "Methinks they have the King and people behind them."

Outside in the antechamber Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, spoke urgently to the Sinclairs. He was huddled in a window embrasure with David and his

uncle, Jason Sinclair, out of earshot of all the other people crowded into the room, waiting patiently for an audience with Queen Elizabeth. Essex had taken a great liking to the Highlanders, and, young and impetuous himself, he easily identified with the imprisoned Alexander. Like Alex, he would far rather have been out somewhere engaged in a challenging mission than simpering and jockeying with the other courtiers who clustered like buzzing drones around the Queen. These men disgusted him. He felt nothing but contempt for the outrageous lies and sickly-sweet flattery they dripped into the royal ear. Not he! Though he admired the Queen for other reasons, he would never, he vowed, stoop to such base tactics to win her favor.

Now Essex was excited, as he always was when some new challenge presented itself. He confided, "I have thought of a way whereby Alexander might be released. And 'tis a way that will not cause Her Majesty to lose face." He grinned wryly, adding, "She greatly dislikes having to back down once she has taken a stand about something."

David and his uncle looked at each other, wondering if they dared put any stock in the rather erratic Essex. They liked Robert, but had observed that he attached himself to causes and just as quickly lost interest when they showed no sign of speedily being resolved. But on the other hand, they remembered too that this young man had taken the Queen's fancy as no other had done since Dudley; she was amazingly tolerant of Essex's whims and was inclined to indulge him.

David, tall like the rest of his family, but fairer, gripped his hand. "If you succeed, Devereux, we will be forever indebted to you."

"Wait here." Essex grinned, then swaggering a little, left them and boldly entered the Presence Chamber

without waiting to be announced.

Cecil glanced up with a frown, marveling at Essex's impudence of barging in without waiting for leave to enter, but the Queen's glum expression brightened at the sight of the handsome young man with his waving auburn hair and dark eyes that reminded her of another Robert's. She held out her hand to him. Essex kissed it with more than his usual enthusiasm, and Elizabeth beamed. She might be fifty-six

years old but she still had a great appreciation for comely men; it was a comfort to her to have this Robert to gaze upon now that she couldn't have *the* Robert. Essex had dash and flair; he sparked up any room he entered with his restless energy and brilliant smile. He drew the attention of many women. Later, he would rue the day that he had ever attracted the attention of a Queen.

He interrupted the business of the day by engaging Elizabeth in a few moments of idle chatter telling her all the latest gossip while Cecil, who disliked him, waited impatiently. Then he brought the conversation around to the gifts that the Queen had recently sent to Scotland on the occasion of King James's marriage, and shocked her minister by tossing off lightly, "They were fine enough, I suppose, but nothing out of the ordinary."

Elizabeth's smile faded and she looked miffed. The presents she had sent to Scotland had cost a small fortune. She had chosen them with special care, anxious that hers should outdo all the others her cousin would receive, particularly those from France and Spain. Now she felt a spurt of anger to hear them criticized and made light of, but Essex didn't notice and hurried on.

" 'Twould have been better to have given something more unique," he said. "Something other than the expected thing. Yours will not be much different, I'll

warrant, than those sent by Spain and France."

Cecil, listening, was appalled at his temerity. Even the royal eyes were glowering at him now, though the Queen was listening closely. How dare he suggest such a thing, she fumed inwardly, when she had taken such pains to make her gifts stand out? There were times, she thought darkly, when she wondered how she continued to suffer the slights of this impudent churl.

Devereux blithely roamed the chamber waving his hands in his expressive way, completely oblivious to the stir he had made. " 'Tis the unusual that's remembered and more appreciated. If you could have found something that, say . . . appealed to the King in a more *personal* sense it would have been better, or something that would have appeased some special desire . . ."

Suddenly he swung around to face the Queen as if an idea had just occurred to him. "Your Grace, I have thought of something unique! Why not pardon the Scotsmen at present imprisoned in the Tower?

Would that not bring delight to the King's heart, considering the severe pressure he has been under from his people to have these men released? What a splendid gesture of goodwill that would be, far and away above all the mundane presents James has received!"

There was dead silence in the room. Cecil almost choked in his indignation that anyone, especially this rash young upstart, should make so bold as to try to tell the Queen what to do. But Elizabeth smiled thinly, thinking, Essex, you are as transparent as glass. You will never make a good courtier, I fear. You fool, do you not realize that I'm aware of your friendship with the Sinclairs? And to try to manipulate me thus . . . !

She studied him from eyes that were hooded now, reflecting, It is well for you that I cannot find it in my heart to take offense but take care, my incautious

young rascal, that the day doesn't come when my heart turns hard and cold.

"Well?" Essex demanded impatiently. "What think you of that idea?"

"You may leave me for now," the Queen replied curtly, snubbing him. "I have important business to discuss with my minister."

The two women wandered through the crowds who had flocked from everywhere to Wilton Fair, the largest in northern England. The fair overflowed the common into the field beyond, and in the bright afternoon sunshine the women looked about and saw a sea of gaily painted caravans, carts of every size and description, and hundreds of tents pitched far back where the field met the woods down by the sparkling water of the Tweed. Farmers had brought their livestock to be judged cattle, sheep, pigs, and goats and one of Bert Porter's fine bulls had taken a blue ribbon. Even Stafford had come to watch the judging and to purchase fresh stock for his estate, but once these events were over, both husbands lost interest and made ready to return home.

Gwen had no intention of going home just yet. The evening was always the most exciting time at the fair. Then all the lights would be lit; there would be games, displays of dancing, juggling, acrobatics, and sword-swallowing, and Gwen was determined not to miss it; she was equally determined that her friend would not miss it either, though Marina was too proud to ask her husband for anything.

Bert Porter glanced at Stafford and shrugged. "Ah . . . let them stay. We can leave a couple of men to protect them and bring them home. 'Tis all just harmless fun and merrymaking anyway, and Gwen knows most of the locals here."

Edgar gave in. He was even prevailed upon by Gwen to part with a few coppers so that his wife could play a game or buy a bauble or two. Stafford wasn't worried. He had little Clare behind the tough walls of Baxton Hall, his assurance that her mother would return to him. "Be home by nine of the clock," he ordered.

Once their men departed the women were gay. The plump Gwen wore her best pink silk gown, for this was an occasion! Marina was dressed in cool blue muslin dotted with gold, with blue and gold ribbons in her hair and a posy of primroses tucked into the dipping bodice of her frock. They clasped hands and laughed, delighted at the way they had "managed" Edgar, and feeling like conspirators they set out to have a wonderful time, wending and weaving among the throng, staring at everything.

There were stalls selling china and pottery, ribbons and lace, paintings and crude sculpture and just about anything one could want. They peered curiously at jars and bottles containing medicine said to cure everything from gout to toothache, and unguents for the ladies claiming to make even the ugliest face a vision of beauty. They laughed over the antics of a dancing bear, the tricks of a tiny monkey in a bright red jacket and top hat, and, shivering with delicious anticipation, ventured into a tent to see the "only woman in the world born with four breasts, two fore and two aft."

Music rang out and the hawkers had to shout to be heard over the noise of flutes, drums, clashing cymbals, and the sheer din of the crowd.

"Enter here and see a beast-man, half goat and half human!" one roared.

Another cried, "Know the future and be prepared! Madam Astra is the best in the land, consulted by kings and queens and noble folks. Come in, come in!

Would you stumble blindly into the future?"

Excited, Marina dragged Gwen into the tent, where a slatternly old

gypsy woman sat huddled over a filthy pack of cards, the shelter reeking with sweat and alcohol. So drunk was Madam Astra that she could scarcely open her eyes, nor could they understand a word she said to them. They left in disgust and soothed their annoyance by buying a huge curling block of taffy. "I predict," said Marina, "that this sweet will make us very fat."

Giggling, they continued on, their long-suffering guards following along behind. Gwen whispered, with a glance over her shoulder, "They'll tire of this soon enough. Wait" she fished in her basket and came out with a coin and tossed it back to them, saying, "You must be very thirsty. Buy yourselves a drink of beer."

By the time the lights came on in the evening they had lost their drunken retainers. "My, are we not clever?" Gwen laughed.

The weather was perfect for the fair, warm and still and slightly sultry, and as the torches flared, adding to the heat, both women removed their gauzy shawls and folded them away in their baskets, enjoying the night air touching the skin of their chests and shoulders which now were largely bare. Gwen in particular noticed the many masculine glances that had been directed to Marina all day, and more now that she had removed her shawl, unconsciously offering more of herself to view. Throwing a sidelong glance at her friend, Gwen saw that she looked flushed and beautiful and happier than she had ever seen her before. Her golden hair was slightly rumpled, with damp little tendrils curling around her face, and her large dark eyes sparkled in the torchlight. For these few hours, Gwen knew, Marina had forgotten the misery of her

life at Baxton Hall, and for that her friend was glad. "If only I could help her more . . ." she thought again. "If only she could be got out of that dismal fortress she inhabits. Oh, why didn't Edgar Stafford die!"

They moved on through the crowd, most of whom were strangers, Marina with a stuffed toy for Clare tucked under her arm, drinking in the sights and smells of the warm night and wishing fervently that she never had to return to the Hall. And she might not have! Aye, many was the time she had contemplated running away once more, taking the few coppers she had hidden and disappearing where Edgar could never find her but for Clare. Never, never would she leave her daughter in the clutches of that man! Nay, she would die first. Stafford had never touched her again, but the threat of violence was always there, and now it was not just herself who was at risk. He knew she

could see it in his mocking eyes that Clare was not his child. Now Marina lived in dread that one day he would explode; would try to hurt the little girl. If that day ever came, she promised herself, she would kill him.

The sound of lively music attracted them and they stopped to watch a dancing display, Marina dully conscious of time slipping away and remembering Edgar's warning to be home by nine o'clock and it was eight now.

A platform had been roped off for the dancers and a thick crowd of spectators surrounded it, the two women wedged in among them, every eye turned toward the stage. Almost every eye. It was Gwen who sensed they were being stared at. Turning her head, she met the eyes of a man standing perhaps twenty feet away, he too hemmed in by the throng.

Yet he stood out, being far taller than those around him. Everything about him was black his clothes,

hair and beard, the shadowy hollows of his eyes and Gwen, who feared very little, shivered at the intent way he was watching them. There was something frightening and devilish about the stranger, and Gwen was sorry now that the guards weren't with them, realizing with a pang that now they would have to go home alone.

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The dance ended and the crowd dispersed, scattering in all directions, and though Gwen tried to keep track of the dark stranger she lost sight of him in all the people milling about. She stood for a moment scanning the common, but except for the areas lit by flares and the hurricane lamps at each of the booths, the rest was dark. Behind the stalls and caravans, under the trees that dotted the field, there were a thousand places where an evil-doer could hide, ready to pounce on two women foolish enough to travel the country roads alone.

"That man . . ." Gwen clutched her friend's hand. "I liked not the looks of him."

Marina peered at her. "What man? What are you talking about?"

When Gwen explained, Marina burst out laughing. Gwen was forever claiming that men were staring at them at her, Marina. She seemed to

think that every

fellow who crossed Marina's path had either amorous or evil designs on her. Marina was used to it by now and usually ignored it.

"Come on," she chuckled, "we must be getting home before Edgar sends out a search party to look for me."

But Gwen hung back. She felt safer mingling with the crowd. "Mayhap we should try to find the guards," she suggested, but again Marina laughed. It would take them hours to find their escort in a fairground still bustling with people, she pointed out, and if she didn't arrive home at the appointed time! Well, she didn't have to tell Gwen what would happen.

The two women left the common, Gwen reluctantly and more nervous than Marina had ever seen her, muttering that the stranger had had the look of the devil about him and had given them the "evil eye." She was fairly quivering with fear as they hurried along, especially once they left the lights and noise of the fair behind them and moved into the quiet countryside with its thick hedges along either side of the track and clumps of elm and oak trees, thick blackness under the swaying boughs. A half-moon like a sly, winking eye hung in the night sky and shed faint silver over their surroundings, but making the shadows where it couldn't penetrate all the more menacing.

"Dear God!" Gwen gasped and bumped against Marina when a rabbit darted out from a ditch and bounded away into a field with a flick of its white-tipped tail. Both women nearly swooned when, as they were passing along a wall, a horse suddenly put its large head over the top, almost touching Marina's shoulder. When they recovered from that shock and hurried on, Gwen constantly throwing glances behind them, they eventually came to the crossroads near an

ancient broken bridge. Marina lived a few hundred yards to the north, and Gwen about the same distance to the south. Here they stopped and looked at each other, both by now slightly breathless.

"Come home with me," said Gwen, "and Bert will take you up to the Hall."

"Don't be silly. 'Tis only up yon road"

"What of that devil?"

Marina was a lot more afraid of the devil who awaited her at home, and shook her head. "Go." She grinned, giving her friend a little push. "I'll warrant I can beat you home."

They started off in opposite directions, both running, but as soon as she glanced back to see that Gwen had rounded a corner and vanished from sight, Marina slowed to a walk, in no great hurry to return to Edgar Stafford. Would that she didn't have to go back to him at all! It was a beautiful night, she mused with a glance about, so warm and still, the countryside bathed in silvery moonlight. The novelty of being alone, away from all the spying eyes at the Hall, filled her with a wonderful sense of exhilaration and freedom. Walking slowly, a defiance seizing hold of her, Marina sniffed the moist night air and listened to the rustling of the small wild creatures that lived in the fields and woods of the region and fervently wished she were as unfettered as they were. It wasn't only Edgar who might explode, she thought resentfully, wondering how long she could stand to be shackled; she herself might! If only she could find a way to get Clare out of Baxton Hall; a way to support her daughter and make a home for them both, then she would be happy. Perhaps not *blissfully* happy, but well enough, far better than she was now.

The track Marina was on dwindled and led to a narrow path through a stand of birch trees, dappled

with moonlight and shadow, one that made her think of a spangled fairy glade in the quiet of the night. Smiling, she caught a fleeting glimpse of a bushy tail as a fox sped across her path, on the hunt for his supper, and there were rabbits aplenty and the scurrying and rustling of countless other small animals going about their business.

All this was natural and she had no fear, no presentiment that she was being followed. She was almost out of the woods; the path stretched before her into the moonlight, when she heard from the darkness of the trees behind her, "Marina . . ." a low voice calling her name.

She gave a violent start and spun about, peering into the woods, thinking that Bert Porter might have come after her to make sure she got home safely, or even that it could be Edgar himself. But the fine hair on her arms and the back of her neck rose quivering; her mouth had gone dry and her flesh suddenly felt cold.

Marina almost bolted when a tall figure stepped out of the shadows and walked up the path toward her, but there was something about

that figure, the way he moved, the tilt of his head, that kept her riveted to the spot. Even when he came out into the light Marina didn't recognize him. The stranger was very dark and gaunt, bearded, forbidding, every inch the devil that Gwen had talked about earlier.

Then Marina saw his eyes.

"Holy mother . . ." she breathed. "Alex!"

She felt a great burst of joy. All these years . . . the wondering, the yearning, the twisting, savage knife of rejection grinding in her heart . . . yet here he was. He had come back to her! "Alex!" she repeated, taking a few steps toward him, tears rushing into her eyes. Then she stopped.

It wasn't Alex at all. It was a dark, gaunt-faced stranger who resembled him. The hope in her heart plummeted, and, peering at him in the moonlight, Marina felt the fine hairs rise at the back of her neck, thinking that it might be his ghost.

She wheeled around and bolted up the path toward Baxton Hall, too terrified to look back, even when she heard footsteps pounding behind her. She opened her mouth to scream when she heard him gaining on her, but her throat felt tight and clogged and only a choked cry came out. When Alex threw his arms around her and swept her up off her feet, Marina almost swooned, both her voice and her limbs frozen, numbed with horror. With a swift glance around, Alex picked her up and carried her deep into the trees.

Gradually, as they plunged through the underbrush, with moonlight slanting down through the branches, shafts of silvery light interspersed with darkness, Marina became aware that the hand clamped over her mouth was warm, as was the lean body welded to hers as he gripped her firmly. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm real enough. Are you not glad to see me?"

Alex pressed her down on a thick bed of leaves and leaned over her, smiling. "Marina! God, how I've longed for this moment. Don't be afraid," he repeated with a little laugh. "Did you think I was a ghost?"

In the cool, pearly incandescence dappling the woods they stared at each other, Alex with avid interest and joy and Marina in rigid terror. Now she knew that he was no spirit but he still wasn't the Alex she remembered. Peering up at him, her heart fluttering, Marina saw that his face was haggard so that his cheekbones stood out and there was a

bitterness to his mouth that hadn't been there before. His eyes were sunken and he looked far older and harder than the man she had fallen in love with. He seemed

like a stranger to her.

Waves of shock went through her. Long ago Marina had convinced herself that she would never see him again and must accept that, and though the ache had lingered on, she had resigned herself to her loss. Sinclair hadn't wanted her. She had only represented a brief little adventure in his active life. Now . . . this man, this caricature of Alexander had come back. It was cruel, horrible!

He leaned over her, his back to the moonlight. "My God, how beautiful you've become." Alex examined her flawless creamy skin, her dainty nose, unblemished mouthall perfection where once she had been battered and bruised, potentially scarred for life. "Marina!" he breathed, his eyes hungrily roving her stiff face. "My love, tell me you've missed me as much as I have you?"

She cleared her throat. "Youyou've changed," she remarked hoarsely.

"I'll explain. But now"

Without warning, Alex bent his head and kissed her passionately, as he'd yearned to do for the last three years. Marina inhaled sharply, she pushed against his chest as she felt his hard, seeking lips ravish hers, felt his beard scrape her skin, and recoiled at the way he clutched her almost desperately, his body against hers strong, demanding. Alex hardly heard her muttered protests or felt her trying to push him away as he plundered her mouth, kissing her smooth cheeks, her throat, eyes, ears, overcome at finding her in his arms once more. After a moment he whispered, "You haven't forgotten how it was with us, surely?"

Every single day she had tried to forget! It had been the only way to save her sanity. As the shock of Alexander's reappearance receded a little, Marina was reminded of what this man had done to her. "I have

forgotten," she lied. "It's all in the past."

Alex chuckled huskily and kissed her again, molding her to him, desire surging as he breathed in the sweet warm scent of her, a scent he well remembered. But the moment Marina felt his desire, her anger

sharpened even as she felt something stir and leap up inside her. Changed Sinclair might be, lean and almost Satanic he looked, but his body was still young, hard, compelling, in such contrast to the gnarled, decrepit husband she was tied to, a man who could never satisfy her youthful cravings or fulfill her in any other way either. Finally Marina jerked her head away, reminding herself that Alex was to blame for the situation she was in. Had he kept his promise to her, she would never have come to this pass, nor would her baby be in the clutches of Edgar Stafford.

"Why did you come back?" There was no welcome in her tone at all. She pushed him roughly away and sat up, throwing a nervous glance around the woods. She was late coming home already. At any moment Edgar or some of his guards might appear, and if they saw her with Alex! "You must leave here at once!" she hissed, her stomach beginning to churn with fear. "Go while you can, for if my husband finds you here he will not hesitate to kill you."

When Marina made to rise, Alex caught her arm. He felt crushed by her cold reception. Perhaps, he reasoned, it had been foolish, but he had expected a warmer reception than this. He understood that Marina was very confused, and he meant to explain, though every moment he tarried here in England he was risking his life. Three years was a long time, and much had happened to both of them in the interval. Now his main concern was to ascertain if Marina still cared for him at all.

A week ago he had stopped at Ayrshire on his way

south. He had been highly skeptical when he listened to Garth and Elsie's story. But Elsie stoutly maintained, "I think the girl realized her mistake in running away from her husband. She was so anxious to go home to tell him that he was going to be a father at last. Marina seemed to feel that would change everything between them; that it would make a great difference to their marriage." Alex had not really believed Elsie, though Marina herself had told him that Stafford's lack of an heir had accounted for much of his violent behavior. But she had also sworn to Alex that she had never lain with Stafford at all; that their marriage had never been consummated.

"Why in God's name did you go back to Stafford?" Marina tried to tug her hand away. "I must get home now!"

"You had a child, didn't you?" Alex asked her softly. "Is it mine,

Marina?"

Now she knew why he had come back! Somehow, doubtless from Garth and Elsie, Alex had found out about the baby, and had come to claim her. Knowing him as she did, he was quite capable of storming into Baxton Hall to try to take his daughter, aye, even if it meant a battle with Edgar to get her. And it would. Her husband would as soon kill Clare than allow her to be taken from him.

"Edgar is the father," Marina blurted, "so you have wasted your time in coming here."

He flinched. "Then you lied to me. The marriage was consummated?"

"Obviously!" She felt a stab of guilt, one that was quickly overcome when she recalled her misery of the last three years. And there would be more than misery to bear if she didn't get home at once!

This time when Marina tried to pull her hand from his, Alex let her go.

There was a poignant moment when he turned into the light and gazed up at her, poised and ready to flee, and the moonlight was reflected in his eyes. For just that second he looked like the old Alex, and Marina felt her heart being wrenched apart, felt herself crumble, weaken; then she turned and ran away, tears blinding her.

Alex stood on the path and watched her racing away from him without a backward glance, the night breeze lifting her blonde hair to float around her slender figure, wraithlike in the moonlight. More beautiful she was, he mused, far more beautiful . . . but not the Marina he had known. Or had he ever really known her at all?

He was devastated. For more than three years, all during his time in the Tower, a dream had sustained him and kept him from losing his mind. A thousand times he had envisaged this meeting, holding her, kissing her, telling her how much he had missed her how much he loved her. Now Marina had shown no interest in him whatsoever. Not once had she asked where he had been for the past three years. And she had lied to him about her marriage. "Go home," he told himself. "Forget."

In the courtyard of Baxton Hall Marina came upon Edgar and his men about to mount their horses, her husband shouting orders in a harsh, angry voice. When he saw her he roared across the yard, "Where have

you been, woman? Did I not warn you to return before nine of the clock?"

Rushing over, Stafford grabbed her roughly and shook her. "What means this?" He glared down at her pale face, then threw a searching look over her shoulder wondering about her escort. "What happened to Ben? Why did he not return with you?"

Marina's greatest fear was that Edgar and his men would ride out in search of Ben and come upon Alexander instead, which could bring disaster to all of them.

She hated Alex Sinclair for carelessly putting them at risk.

"Ah . . . Ben became separated from us in the crowd," she stammered, shaking. "But I sent a lad who knows him to tell him I'd started for home . . . Gwen and I together"

"Late home!" His thick fingers bit into her arm and Marina cringed, certain he was going to strike her. Instead, he thrust her through the heavy door into the hall and in the candlelight saw her pallor.

"What has happened?" he asked suspiciously, his mean little eyes crawling over her. "You look as if you have seen a ghost."

She had, or felt as if she had. Hastily Marina made up a story about eating too freely of the cheap food at the fair and having to stop on the way home to be sick. And indeed she *did* feel ill, even Edgar could see that. The shock of seeing Alex again; the terror generated by the thought that Stafford would find them together, all of it made her feel sick and light-headed and faint. She had to grip the back of a settle to steady herself.

"Hummm . . ." Scratching his beard, Edgar examined her closely, and those eyes of his missed very little. It constantly amazed Marina that although he was now sixty-five years old, he was as fit and acute as ever, all his faculties or almost all still serving him well. She was so frightened by the tense, explosive atmosphere in the hall that she broke out in an icy sweat, though the room was warm and stuffy, and feeling queasy, stuffed the knuckles of her right hand against her mouth.

"Get you up to bed," he ordered finally, and waved to the stairs.

Fortunately, Edgar never troubled her in the bed-chamber, and once the door was closed and she was alone, Marina expelled a long, shuddering breath. She sagged against the door feeling too weak to take another step. Her legs were shaking beneath her and her skin was clammy, her stomach tightened into a hard knot. She felt like a woman who had just walked a tightrope and, by a miracle, managed to reach safety on the other side.

If Edgar had caught them together! If he even suspected!

After a moment Marina ran to the window and peered down into the courtyard, her heart fluttering wildly. She would not put it past Edgar to send his men looking for Ben. But there were no horses down below now, though she spied Tar and two of the others idly chatting by the stable door, so it was obvious that they were not going out after all.

"Thank God!" Marina whispered, her stiff shoulders slumping in relief.

Her eyes were drawn in the opposite direction and she scanned the moonlit countryside wondering where he might be, the shock of Alexander's sudden appearance tonight still shuddering through her in waves. But Marina had no need to wonder what had brought him back. He had made that quite clear. While in Ayrshire he had heard the news that she was pregnant and suspected that he might be a father. She could well imagine the proud nobleman in him loathing the idea that any offspring of his should be brought up in dank Baxton Hall, another manan Englishman! claiming to be the father.

She went to her bed and sat down, her hands clasped tight in her lap, praying that she had managed

to convince Alex that he wasn't the father and that he would leave now and never come back.

Marina undressed and got into bed, but with scant hope of sleeping. One moment she raged against Sinclair, the next her starved senses reminded her of how it had once been between them. The touch of his lips tonight on hers, the urgent hardness of his body, brought everything back. Now she lived like a nun, the only love she knew that of her little one but was it enough? She was still but twenty years old, and though she tried to ignore it, there were yearnings; hopeless yearnings. Marina tossed and turned, feeling them clamoring in her now, hot and insistent and desperate for release. "Why did you come back, you devil?" she moaned. "Why? Why . . . ?"

A somber, dark figure stood at an upstairs window in Wilton Inn, watching the people making merry in the street below, the whole town like a carnival because of the fair. The inn faced the town square and a flute player sat upon the statue of a horse, like Pan, piping madly while the people danced around him in the flare of torches, most of them very drunk. High up as he was, Alex had a good vantage point and his sharp eyes picked up a pair of cutpurses fleecing the crowd that had gathered to watch the dancers. Whores, also drawn to the town by the large influx of potential customers, were approaching men boldly, determined to make the best of the situation.

One young strumpet spied Alex standing by the window. She threw him a smile, then pulled down the low-cut bodice of her gown, brazenly displaying her wares, two large white breasts that looked moonlike in the light of the torches. She made a sign, first pointing

to herself, then jabbing a finger at the inn, offering to come upstairs if he were agreeable.

For a fleeting second he was tempted. She seemed young, at least from where he stood, and not uncomely, and he hadn't made love to a woman for more than three years. He was also tense and angry, disappointed and bitter, and to lie with a woman would have brought him some ease. But he had never had recourse to turn to a whore in his life, nor would he start now.

The urge passed and he moved back from the window and stretched out in bed, his arms behind his head, and contemplated the events of the last few weeks.

A month ago Alex had been released from the Tower. He had been let go with the warning that he must never set foot in England again. His family, indeed all who knew him, had been shocked by the change in him, but they had no conception of how ghastly conditions were in the Tower of London, nor the dire sights and sounds one heard there, or even what it felt like to live with the thought that Queen Elizabeth could again change her mind and send one to the block after all. The lady was nothing if not fickle.

No one knew better than Alex that the unconivial hospitality of the Tower had aged and hardened him; that the carefree youth he had once been had died there. Had his character not toughened to the texture of tempered steel, he would have gone mad or expired in

prison as many another had done.

His worried family had taken him back to the Highlands to recuperate, and he would have been there still had not Alex found it impossible to rest until he discovered what had happened to Marina; discovered for himself, and he was desperate to find

out if he was the father of her child.

Now, brooding about their meeting tonight, he tried to accept the fact that her feelings for him had changed with the passage of time, and that perhaps he had been foolish to hope they had not. Also, that the child she had given birth to had been Stafford's after all, proving that Marina had lied to him that night at the Four Doves.

Alex knew he should return to Scotland immediately and forget her. Every hour he spent in England was fraught with danger, though by now he could render a very good imitation of the southern accent, especially that of the North of England, which had some of the burr of his own native tongue; that coupled with his radically altered appearanceshould by some chance he encounter Edgar Staffordlent him a certain amount of anonymity, though he was still taking a grave risk. Aye, he told himself soberly, he should forget Marina; forget the past and go home. He had a full and challenging life awaiting him in Scotland. The King himself was said to be anxious to have speech with him once he had sufficient time to recover from his ordeal in England.

But the more Alex mulled over the events of the evening, the more convinced he became that there was something not right with Marina's present situation. Her reaction to his sudden appearance had been more one of terror than of loathing, though she had, certainly been startled at how different he looked. Yet . . . Alex supposed it was natural enough for a woman to be alarmed at the thought of her husband finding her with another man, the more so a man whoin the eyes of Staffordhad once abducted her. If they had indeed reconciled and were now living happily with their child, the heir Stafford had always longed for, then it was understandable that Marina

would want nothing to spoil things . . . but Alex still had the feeling that something was wrong.

When he had first arrived in the area three days ago and cautiously reconnoitered Baxton Hall, Alex had immediately spotted many significant changes. First, he noticed that the wall around the manor,

crumbling when he had last seen it, had now been carefully repaired and strengthened. He saw that the old guard of aging men were gone and that younger, more able fellows had taken their place and that there were more of them than in the past. Also that the downstairs windows of the house had been glazed and reinforced with iron bars. Baxton Hall now had all the markings of a prison!

Gripped by a surge of excitement, Alex sprang up and began to pace about his chamber, his mind working feverishly. Something was amiss at the manor, he felt it in his bones! That combined with Marina's almost hysterical fear when she saw him tonight almost convinced him that she was being held there against her will; she and the child both. And that baby . . . perhaps in truth a Sinclair! A Sinclair who by rights should have been under the protection of its father and clan in the Highlands of Scotland, rather than being held captive much as he had been in an English prison! That, Alex told himself grimly, he would never tolerate. He could not live content while a bairn of his languished behind bars.

In six days the Wilton fair would end and the town would empty out and return to normal. When that happened, strangers in the area would become much more conspicuous and questions might be asked. Then it would be dangerous to tarry; more than dangerous foolhardy! He was not so anxious to lose his head or go back to the Tower, the more so since, and he had to recognize this, his assumption concern-

ing Marina's life now could be completely wrong.

Well then, six days, Alex promised himself, then back to Scotland.

Edgar sat across from his wife at the board and wolfed down his breakfast with his usual rude gusto. As always, he was too intent in stuffing his mouth to waste time in conversation. They were having brook trout that morning, one of Marina's favorite dishes, but she sat opposite her husband distractedly pushing the fish back and forth across her plate.

Finally, once his own plate was empty, Edgar noticed her lack of appetite.

"What's ado?" he asked gruffly, gazing at her from under his brows. "Is your stomach still uncertain?"

"Aye," she nodded. "That it is."

Shoving his own pewter dish aside, he snatched hers and quickly polished off the contents while Marina watched him uneasily. The man was incredible, she reflected. Sixty-five and he ate like a young buck a third of his age. She had once likened him to a gnarled old oak tree, well-seasoned and tough, that only improved with the years, and Edgar was that way still. He was never sick, never tired or lacking in energy, and though much of the raiding that had once taken place back and forth across the border had lessened now that England and Scotland were at peace, Stafford still indulged in the odd cattle-thieving foray to the north. In the frequent disputes over land with the next county, Edgar was always in the thick of it, always ready to do battle. He could handle a horse, sword, or pistol better than any of his men, most of whom were less than half his age.

Marina studied him covertly, detesting him, but in awe just the same. There he sat sturdy and compact, rugged and grizzled indestructible! He was a man of

principle in his own narrow, inflexible way, and as fanatically religious as ever. That aspect of his character, she supposed, had saved herself and Alexander from even more trouble, because Edgar had confided to her shortly after he brought her back to England that, but for his principles, he would have reported both of them to Sir Francis Walsingham at the time they vanished from Baxton Hall.

"Think of it," he'd said. "You claimed to be the Queen's bastard and Sinclair attempted to free Mary Stuart. To Walsingham there would seem to be collusion in that. Be glad, woman, that I have no love for the Protestants nor would lift a finger to help them in any way. 'Tis the only thing that saved you and your Scottish lover from destruction."

He knew that the child was Sinclair's, though it suited him to pretend otherwise, and when the baby was born he named her Clare, after his mother, commenting with a sly, sidelong look at Marina, "She's a Stafford through and through, and like the beasts of the field, my kind would kill their young before they would allow others to interfere with them in any way. 'Twould be well if her mother never forgot that."

Marina never had.

Now, watching him stand up and buckle on his belt, which held a dagger and his favorite pistol, all Marina's terror of the night before

came rushing back when she thought of what would happen if Stafford knew that Alex was in the area.

He threw a quick glance at her before he went out. Never ill himself, Edgar was impatient with it in others. "Take some essence of peppermint," he advised carelessly. " 'Tis good for settling the belly. Or have Gwen Porter make you up one of her possets if she comes to visit."

"W-where are you going today?" Marina inquired nervously.

Stafford raised his brows, surprised that she should ask. Normally Marina showed no interest at all in his activities. He saw that she looked wan and upset and wondered if she might be sicker than he'd thought and perhaps wanted to know where he would be in case she had to reach him quickly.

"I'm off to make sure that none of the gypsy crew who came to Wilton for the fair have camped on my land," he growled, and after thinking for a moment, added, "But I'll leave Tar at the Hall. Send a message by him if you need me."

Still he hesitated, studying her. "Shall I fetch Dr. Gregory?"

The last thing Marina wanted was Dr. Gregory, he of the keen eyes and sharp intellect, a physician who had acquired an enviable reputation for excellence in the county and had a special interest in diseased humors of the mind. He it was who treated the mighty Northumberland and all the other important people in the region. He also spent time in research at the insane asylum at Newcastle.

"Nay, nay, it will pass," Marina replied quickly.

Edgar nodded and left.

Slowly Marina let out her breath, warning herself to be careful, but she was in a high state of agitation all that day wondering what Edgar and his men would find during their tour of the estate. She couldn't bring herself to set foot out of the house and refused to let Jillie, the nursemaid, take little Clare out into the sunshine to play, making the excuse that since she herself felt ill there might be bad humors lurking in the air, contamination that could hurt the child.

Marina was quivering with trepidation when Stafford returned for supper that early evening and anx-

iously examined his face when he stomped into the hall, vastly relieved when he seemed in good spirits.

"What of the gypsies?" she ventured.

Stafford roared with laughter, his small eyes glittering. He had found none on his own property, he replied, but had come upon a band of them camped in the field of a neighbor. And he had helped his neighbor chase them off.

"And a fine bit of sport we had with them too," he chuckled. "When we surrounded them and started to set fire to their caravans, their leader a young fellow had the temerity to challenge us. He was a proud one and eager to show off in front of his women, no doubt, but he wasn't so proud once we were finished with him."

Marina didn't want to hear what had happened to him, but Edgar told her anyway, and with relish, his tale interspersed with bursts of laughter.

"You know how the tinks like to dance?" Marina nodded, wanting to cover her ears. "Well, we forced the leader to dance a merry jig by firing shots at his feet, and Christ's blood, we thought he'd go on forever. But finally he collapsed. I put a shot through his head then to put him out of his misery, and as a warning to the others against trespassing. Then we burned their wagons and drove the rest off the property." He wiped his streaming eyes on his sleeve. "Filthy, scurvy crew. Let that be a lesson to them."

Marina was horrified. "You you killed one of them?"

He nodded. "And I had every right, too. They were on private property."

"And . . . and there were women and children among them?"

"Aye, they are known to breed like rabbits, but they

are less than human. They manage as well in the open as the beasts of the field."

She hated him and suddenly it boiled over. Marina jumped to her feet and faced up to him for the first time since she had come back, too upset to consider the consequences. "*You* are the beast, Edgar Stafford!

Oh, God, how could you do such a thing? 'Tis so heartless and cruel, so"

"Close your mouth, woman!" he thundered, his craggy face suffused with angry color. "These gypsies bring filth and disease, they will steal whatever they can lay their hands on, including children. Do you want to see your daughter end up a slave in a tinker camp, eh?"

"They would never"

"They would!" he roared. "And don't gainsay me, wench. They are well aware of the law against trespassing and should not have broken it, but . . ." he dropped his voice and went on ominously, threateningly, ". . . there are always those who will go too far, who ask to be punished severely, and rarely are they disappointed."

Later, in her chamber, Marina felt a chill at the way she had lost her head and defied him, but it was getting harder and harder to control her hatred for him all the time, though she must for the sake of her daughter, if not herself. She blamed the sudden appearance of Alexander Sinclair for losing her grip over her emotions, feelings she had tried hard to hide from Edgar ever since she returned to Baxton Hall. One thing she could now be fairly confident about and it brought Marina some relief was that Sinclair had left the immediate vicinity. Hating gypsies as he did, Edgar would have thoroughly scoured the estate in his hunt for them, and would have found Alex had he

been about, and God help the Highlander if he had! she thought with a shudder. God help her too!

For three days following her night at the fair Marina refused to leave Baxton Hall, turning a deaf ear to her daughter's demands to go out, preferring her mother's company to that of her nursemaid. It was more awkward when Gwen Porter tried to coax her into taking a picnic with the children by the river, but still Marina refused, mumbling that she still felt weak and unwell. Gwen walked up the track between the two properties to visit her every other day and they had become the best of friends, whispering their secrets to each other and offering mutual love and support. Both knew that they could count on the other not to betray their confidences and the women had become very close but still Marina couldn't bring herself to tell Gwen about her visit from Alexander.

It was best, she thought, to pretend it had never happened.

Gwen fussed over her and promised to mix up a herbal medicine noted for correcting stomach upsets. "Funny," she murmured, examining Marina closely, "we ate the same things at the fair and I haven't been affected. If you are not improved by tomorrow, I should have Edgar send for the doctor. With all the outsiders in town, there's no saying what you might have picked up."

Later that day Gwen sent a servant over with the medicine and a message for Marina to walk down to visit her next day if she felt better. She proposed they spend the day making jam from all the berries that had ripened, as they had done each year since their friendship began. Edgar came in that evening smacking his lips. He had been talking to Bert Porter and heard that tomorrow was to be jam-making day at

Brokenbridge Farm. "You will go, surely?" he said with a hopeful look at her, and when Marina didn't reply, cried, "God's soul, girl, what ails you? Bigod, I weary of this mopping and sighing. 'Twill be worth giving Dr. Gregory a leg of lamb to have you sorted out. I'll send Tar with a message for him now."

"Nay! N-nay . . . I feel better." Marina looked at him directly then, her expression strained, faintly challenging. "I will go to Brokenbridge if you wish it."

A thought skittered through his mind and vanished. Stafford stared at her for a moment, puzzled at the odd way she was looking at him, then he shrugged. "And why would I not wish it? By the Blessed Virgin, you make no more sense to me than a pig in a poke."

Early the next morning Marina set out to walk the quarter mile to Brokenbridge Farm, a basket containing a sack of sugar, cinnamon, and other spices for flavoring over her arm, covered by a clean white napkin. Marina had dressed simply in a floral cotton gown of mauve, white, and green, her long blonde hair fastened at the nape of her head with a thin satin ribbon.

The bountiful lushness of full summer was upon them and the grass waved thick in the meadows, the trees heavy with shiny green leaves, all still sparkling with dew in the early morning sunshine. There was a minty freshness in the air and the perfume of wild roses from the pink and white blossoms blooming in the hedgerows bordering the lane, and under the trees, in the shadowy places, Marina spotted the damp heads of thousands of bluebells and here and there the waxen white

gleam of a wood lily.

A large hare sat motionless in the field as if carved from stone, and rabbits bounced along the path ahead of her, soundless and soft as thistledown and scarcely

displaying any fear, almost as if they sensed that Marina would never harm them. From the swaying boughs of the oaks and elms she walked under burst a sweet chorus of birdsong, falling on her head like a benediction. The sun slanting down through the trees threw a shower of gold at her feet, like coins carelessly scattered across the path ahead.

Soon Marina came to the place where she had met Alexander. It was darker here and the woods were hushed. She stopped and glanced around, her heart fluttering, recalling with a shiver the way he had called her name, the ghostly sound of his deep voice coming to her out of the darkness, like the past coming back to haunt her. Then the sight of him so different! The shock, the mixture of terror and anger, the bitter and the sweet, all clashing inside her with the force of a thunderbolt. Mayhap . . . mayhap it had only been an illusion, a trick of the mind.

With another nervous look about, Marina hurried on out into the open, glad to feel the sunshine on her face, warming her suddenly cold skin. Her mind went back to that time of waiting in Ayrshire after he left for the Highlands, but promising to return soon to visit her. He loved her, he vowed, and like a fool she'd believed him. Then, as time passed and Alex failed to appear or even write to her, hope had died a cruel death inside her and she was forced to confront the fact that he had deserted her. By then Marina knew that she was pregnant with his child.

Had Sinclair only kept his promise to her she would not be at Baxton Hall now, both she and the baby at the mercy of Edgar Stafford. Never, never could she forgive Alex for that! Marina brooded bitterly. Because of him, her little one was in the grip of a monster.

She crossed the old broken bridge over the stream, the boundary that separated Stafford land from that of the Porters, and soon reached the big graystone farmhouse itself. The kitchen was separated from the house by a kind of causeway, a prevention against fire, and there she found Gwen already hard at work surrounded by pails and baskets of berries. The heat in the room was stifling though all the windows

were wide open, and the lady of the house sat at an ancient yellow deal table, flushed and sweating, her hands and lower arms stained a reddish-purple.

Gwen looked up with a bright welcoming smile. "Oh, you've come. I wasn't sure you would. Then you feel better, sweeting?"

"Aye." Marina returned her smile and set down her basket. "That medicine you sent me worked wonders." She glanced around. "Welladay, but 'tis like a furnace in here, and promising to be hot outside too. Why is it, think you, that we always pick the hottest days to make the jam?" she asked with a grin, taking a long striped apron from her basket and tying it on.

Jam making was usually a cheerful affair, though hot and sticky, and they normally laughed and chattered all the while, and to please the menfolk and children always ended by making tarts and pasties with the surplus berries, delicious when served with a pitcher of thick, fresh cream. But try as she might, Marina's heart wasn't in it that day and her mind kept wandering, so that soon she was nodding absently in response to Gwen's gossip, unable to think of much to contribute herself. Each time her friend asked her if she was sure she was all right, Marina roused herself to fresh effort, but finally, by mid-afternoon, Gwen caught Marina's hands when she tipped a kettle of bubbling jam into a row of stone jars. She pushed

Marina down on a stool and poured her a cup of lemonade. "Drink that," she said briskly, "then get along home. You are not fit for this work today. Nay, don't argue," she added quickly when Marina opened her mouth to protest. " 'Tis just about finished anyway and Nelly can clean up the mess. I'll stop over to see you tomorrow."

Marina nodded. "I feel unusually weary." And small wonder, she had hardly slept at all the previous night!

"Ride home on Tassel," Gwen suggested, offering her mule, but Marina shook her head, grinning ruefully.

"I'm not *that* unfit. 'Tis hardly any way."

Marina's share of the jam had to cool and set before it could be transported and Edgar would call with the cart for it later, but Gwen tucked a still-warm jam tart into her basket, carefully covering it with the napkin, chuckling, "That will sweeten him up enough for tonight."

It felt cool outside after the sweltering heat of the kitchen, and as she walked up the road some of the fuzziness vanished from Marina's head. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and the sun was working its way into the west, long pale gray shadows moving down from the hills across the ripe golden corn in Porter's fields, the woods up ahead dark against the pink wash of the western sky. Staring at the woods, Marina felt the pace of her heart quicken. Would she ever be able to walk through them again, she asked herself, without feeling that tingle of agitation, half dread, half excitement? She could feel it starting up in her now, though she still had to cross the broken bridge that separated the two properties. When she reached it, her boots unnaturally loud on the cobbles

in the quiet countryside, Marina paused for a moment, as she always did, to gaze down into the amberlike water where one could occasionally spot a fish or two. But that wasn't the reason she tarried. She needed to gather up the courage to take that path through the woods, thinking that it would be darker in there now.

Staring into the stream, her mind far away, some flicker of movement in the shadows under the arch of stones caught her eye and suddenly she saw him standing stock-still under the bridge.

Marina sucked in a breath that rasped loud in the stillness. Her heart seemed to stop for an instant, then swelled to bursting in her chest. Terrified, she threw a glance back the way she had come, then ahead to Stafford property, and finally back at the figure waiting under the bridge.

"Blessed Jesu . . . What are you doing here?" she moaned.

"Come down, Marina."

"Nay! Are you mad?" She took a step back from the parapet, and had her legs not been so weak, would have turned and run.

"Then I will come up," Alex threatened.

"Don't! God's love . . . wait."

Panting, her legs like jelly, Marina ran off the hump-backed bridge and half-slid down the embankment in her haste, her basket with the newly baked tart tumbling out of her hand into the stream. She hardly noticed. Her feet squelched the soft mud at the edge of the water as she stumbled along the bank and plunged into the shadows to join

him. Alex was all in black as before, his face whitish in the gloom and his eyes faintly gleaming. Marina stopped two feet away, quivering with rage.

"What do you want?" she demanded breathlessly. "How dare you taunt me like this! We have nothing to say to each other, Sinclair, and if you don't leave me alone I shall tell Edgar"

He wrenched her into his arms and crushed her mouth in a savage kiss.

15

The touch of Alexander's lips on hers was like tinder tossed on a fire long-since tamped down. Marina felt a spark, then a flame blaze up inside her, and cool reason fell before the onslaught of intense emotion. Once she had exulted in the arms of this man, the man who had first awakened her to the ecstasy of love, only to take that love away, denying her what her mind and body craved.

For a few wanton seconds Marina felt herself carried back in time. She returned his passion, more wild now than tender. Without conscious thought her arms rose to curl tightly around his neck, her fingers plunging into his thick black hair, her grip on him frantic as she held his head firmly to hers while greedily savoring his lips. The instant she felt his probing tongue, her mouth opened to him eagerly, and when Alex rammed her against the full length of his aroused

body, Marina instinctively welded herself to his hardness.

A convulsive shudder passed through her. It was as if every cell in her body shrieked, urging her to seek appeasement, and she moved against him, her breath coming fast, a shameful desire drowning out every other consideration. For more than three long years she had lived a life of dismal sterility in Baxton Hall. Now, suddenly, her whole being was vibrantly alive. But when Alex raised his head for a moment, his gaze burning over her heated face in unconcealed triumph, Marina came back to her senses abruptly.

He chuckled, "I see you have not forgotten."

Marina lashed back and slapped his face.

Still grinning, Alex seized hold of her again and forced her down beside him on the jumble of tumbled rocks under the bridge, one arm like a vice around her, the other gripping her wrist when Marina made to raise her hand again.

"I think we have much to say to each other," he said, his eyes taking in every detail of her lovely flushed face, the smoldering dark eyes, lips moist from his kisses. "I want answers to my questions, Marina, and I warn you, I'll keep coming back here until I get them."

"You'll get nothing from me!"

"Ah, but I already have," he mocked, and swiftly, before she could turn her head away, again crushed her lips, his hot, thrusting tongue invading her mouth until she thought she would faint from the force of the violent desire it engendered. One thing hadn't changed, she thought bitterly. Sinclair *still* had the power to arouse her sexually. But that was mere lust. Mentally she hated him for the state he had left her in.

He drew back after a moment and smiled at her, then laughed softly at the fierce way she was glowering

at him. "Surely you won't insist now that you came back here willingly?" Alex sobered as he added, "If you will admit the truth, something might be done about it."

Marina tossed her head disdainfully. "What can you do here, Sinclair? This is England, not the Highlands of Scotland. I went with you once to my sorrow. You must be mad if you think I'd do so again." Her eyes glowed with resentment as all her ire came pouring out. "You made a promise to me in Ayrshire and broke it, so don't think you can vanish from my life and return whenever you please. Why would I go anywhere with a man who had once abandoned me? You are a scoundrel, Sinclair, an arrogant adventurer"

"I was in prison," Alex said bluntly, "for the past three years."

Marina gaped at him. All her anger disintegrated. Prison! Never once had that possibility entered her mind.

"Why?" she whispered.

She was stunned when Alex explained what had happened, how on his way home from Ayrshire he had run into an ambush set up by

Walsingham's agents, and had been taken back to England to stand trial for leading a conspiracy to free Mary Stuart. In growing amazement Marina heard that he had been found guilty and condemned to death, but had been reprieved at the block itself. "They didn't release me," Alex went on, his voice hollow when he spoke about his mind-destroying incarceration in the Tower. "I was held there until a month ago, when finally they let me go."

That explained the great change in his appearance! It also explained her heart soared why Alex hadn't come back for her. Marina almost threw her-

self into his arms and promised to make it all up to him because, fantastic as his story sounded, she was inclined to believe him simply because of how he looked, far different from the old Alex she had fallen in love with.

But it wasn't that simple. She had Edgar Stafford and the safety of her daughter to consider, and neither by word nor deed could she encourage Alex in any way. He was too rash and daring, too impulsive and determined. If she gave him as much as a hint of the sadness and pity she felt for both of them she trembled to think what he might do.

Hardening her heart, and reminding herself that it was too late for them now, she said, "I cannot believe that Walsingham would have risked going into Scotland to take you illegally. Queen Elizabeth would never have allowed it. It would have put the alliance at risk." She rushed on while she still had the strength to do so, "How would King James have reacted to one of his own nobles being kidnapped on Scottish soil? Nay," she shook her head, "I cannot believe it."

"Look at me, Marina?"

Reluctantly, she did.

"Am I the same man you once knew?" A faint, rueful smile touched his lips. "The Tower of London has a way of leaving its mark on a man."

She could have wept for him then as her eyes moved over his face. Oh, he was still very attractive in a lean, hawkish way, but the marks he spoke about were very apparent. It hurt her deeply to see how he had suffered. But so had she! And if she encouraged Sinclair now, then so would her daughter! That, above all, must never happen. What good would it do them if Alex barged into Baxton Hall in his reckless way and all three of them were killed? The thought was chilling,

instantly dampening the amorous feelings

she had had moments before, aye, and the ones that lingered still when his compelling green eyes met hers.

"Is the bairn a lad or a lass?" he asked her softly.

Her nervousness increased at mention of the babe, who at that moment was firmly in the clutches of her husband, and who was never allowed to go anywhere without her well-armed bodyguard beside her.

"My child is a girl," Marina replied stiffly.

"And does she look like her mother?" The gentleness had crept back into his voice, and the hand on her arm seemed to burn through the cheap muslin of her gown.

"Nay"she shook her head"methinks she more resembles her father."

"Stafford?"

She nodded, and almost broke down then and wept. But at mention of her husband all her anxiety came bounding back. She turned to Alex and said fiercely, "What do you think Edgar would do if he found you here?"

"I'm not afraid of Edgar Stafford," he sneered.

"Listen to me, Sinclair." Marina swallowed the tightness in her throat and made herself go on. "Whatever there once was between us is finished. Do you understand? We were both young then andand foolish in many ways. Now I am happy with my husband and child. You must accept that and go away and never try to contact me again."

Marina had half-expected Alex to plead with her, try to coax her into changing her mind, perhaps reaffirm the love he once felt for her, which would have been gratifying. It would have been something to cherish ever afterwards, something that might have made life at Baxton Hall a little more bearable, to think that she had the undying devotion of a handsome nobleman like Alexander Sinclair.

Instead, he threw back his head and laughed.

The sound of that mocking laughter brought a deep, burning flush to

Marina's cheeks and an even deeper disappointment to her aching heart. Further, it was insulting. Far from getting down on his hands and knees to beseech her to change her mind, Sinclair was gazing at her with something like contempt in his eyes.

"Well," he drawled, "if this must be goodbye, then we should part in the proper manner."

With that he jerked her hard against him and his mouth, rough now, showed her no mercy as he sought to prove to her that things were far from over between them and that the contentment she professed to enjoy with her husband was a lie. Marina angrily tried to fight him off, but it was useless. Leaner he might be, but the arms that crushed her against him were like bands of iron; she felt her back would break if she continued to hold herself so rigid, so she allowed herself to go limp with the knowledge that it would soon be over and she would be rid of him at last.

It soon proved to be a mistake.

Bending her back in his arms, Alex plundered her mouth as a man will when a raging thirst is upon him, his tongue burning a path into her mouth, his hand closing over her breast possessively, as if it had been fashioned for him alone. His experienced fingers searched and found her nipple, and soon it was peaking the bodice of her gown, eager for closer attention. Marina uttered a choked cry that was soon silenced under his hot, devouring lips, lips that tasted her mouth, her ears, and trailed a path of fire down the arched column of her throat. Then, while she moaned and quivered, hopelessly trying to free herself, Alex wrenched apart the neck of her gown and lifted one round white breast free of confinement. Bending his

head to it, he gave it the honeyed attention it craved, his tongue rasping and circling, teasing and tantalizing and suddenly all the fight went out of Marina, a burning need taking its place.

Abruptly Alex let her go. Having made his point, he now regarded her mockingly, but he too had his pride and never in his life had he needed to force a woman, or even coax her. Nor were furtive moments stolen in an enemy camp his idea of wooing. Furtive skulking about struck Sinclair as demeaning.

He eyed Marina as she angrily fastened her gown and said, "I think this cannot be goodbye." Then he startled her by asking, "Do you know the ruined priory on the old Wilton Turnpike?"

She was too ashamed of her wanton response to him to answer.

"Meet me there tomorrow at two o'clock, or if you cannot get away then, at the same time the following day." He caught her chin and raised her face to his, his eyes grave now as he added, "I will wait for you until then, Marina, but no longer."

She wanted to cry that he could wait forever for all she cared, but something in his expression warned Marina that he meant exactly what he said; that this would be the last offer he would make her.

"If you come, we will decide what must be done to free you and the baby. But if you don't" she shivered at the finality in his eyes "I will go back to Scotland and you will never see me again."

Without another word Alexander rose and walked away, leaving her sitting alone on the bank of the stream, and when Marina finally had the strength to climb up to the bridge, he had vanished.

She stood gazing about her, a hand pressed to her lips where she could still feel the burning imprint of his mouth. Marina knew then that she had just been

given an ultimatum. "Oh!" she muttered aloud, "the arrogance of the man!" Not a word from him that he still cared, yet he brazenly expected her to follow where he led her, regardless of the risks. But then that was quite in keeping with the character of Lord Alexander Sinclair.

Slowly Marina made her way home, leaving her basket behind. It was

stuck in the reeds at the edge of the stream, completely forgotten.

It was only when Edgar inquired how the jam-making was coming along that Marina remembered dropping the basket, but strangely, she wasn't perturbed. She could always retrieve it in the morning, she thought with a shrug. Strangely too, she felt detached as she watched her husband gorge himself at supper. Even the piglike sounds he made left her impassive.

In the nursery afterwards she romped with little Clare before giving her her bath and tucking her into bed, tasks she preferred to do for the child herself. They played their usual game. "Where did Clare get her beautiful red curls?" Marina smiled, winding a silky tress around her finger.

"From the fox fairy," came the prompt reply.

Marina tweaked her nose. "And where did this tiny button come from?"

"An imp."

"Aye, and her mouth?"

"I dunno, I dunno!" the child giggled, her eyes wide.

"From the sugarplum!" her mother answered and pounced on her, kissing the petal-soft lips puckered up to meet her own, the only kisses until recently that she had enjoyed for the past three years, and of course with Clare it was different.

As she did every night, Marina took the child in her

arms and rocked her to sleep. Clare had a nursemaid at Edgar's insistence, but it was her mother who spent the most time with her. Clare was all Marina had to love, and she loved her fiercely, protectively, possessively, trying desperately to shield her from the grimness of life at the Halland to make up for the lack of a father's attention. Stafford, as he had shown, had no interest in the little girl herself. He only cared for what she stood for in the eyes of his peers and otherwise hardly looked at the child. Did Clare notice his neglect? Marina often asked herself. He was, ostensibly, her father. And to coldly ignore her thus! Furious as it made her, Marina did her best to make up for it and rarely was Clare out of her sight.

When Clare fell asleep, Marina tucked her into bed suddenly wondering what her real father would have thought of her. "Oh, my baby," she moaned inwardly, torn by indecision, "what should I do?" Baxton Hall was such a cold place in which to nurture a child, and if they stayed here Clare would never know that she had a proud Highland heritage and a young, handsome father who might truly love her.

Marina straightened up to leave the nursery and gave a start when she saw Edgar standing in the doorway watching her. "You spoil that girl," he remarked gruffly. " 'Tis never wise to overindulge children. It tends to ruin them for adulthood to come."

As if he were an expert on children!

Marina quietly closed the door of her daughter's room before answering him. "She is only a babe yet, Edgar, not even three years old."

"You cosset her overmuch," he persisted, his gray brows drawn together in a frown as they stood in the upstairs hallway. "All that fussing and pampering is not seemly. Forget not that you have a husband to attend to."

He was jealous! And the thought that he could actually be jealous of a mere baby sickened and angered Marina. It also made her tongue rash.

"Love never spoiled anyone!" she flared, her face reddening. " 'Tis the *lack* of it that ruins a person. And while I have arms to hold her I intend to see to it that Clare never suffers from the lack of it at least from me."

With that she swept past him and down the corridor to her room. Marina had just reached her door when he said, "I perceive that the time has come for Clare to be fostered out for her education. I will look to the matter at once."

Marina almost fell against the door, as if from a blow. The cruelest blow she could have received and he knew it! Oh, how she hated him! Aye, and would not hesitate to kill him too if he tried to take her baby away from her. If that happened, Marina knew that she would die of a broken heart, and for a second she almost turned to beg Stafford to reconsider.

Instead, she came to a decision.

Strangely, dangerous as that decision was, Marina immediately felt better. She felt so good, in fact, that it gave her the courage to turn to Edgar standing at the top of the stairs, a satisfied smirk on his face, well aware of how he had frightened her, and no doubt expecting her to go down on her hands and knees to plead with him to change his mind, thought Marina.

She said nothing, but the look she gave him was one of raw hatred. Then, lifting her head disdainfully, Marina flounced into her room and closed and locked the door behind her.

It was not what Stafford had expected at all, and his eyes narrowed, his suspicious nature sensing some-

thing different in her attitude. "What are you up to, eh, wench?" he mused, and made up his mind to watch her more closely.

Marina was amazed at how calm she felt now that the decision had been made. She lay wide awake in bed, her mind sharp and clear, her nerves steady. All her concentration was focused on how they could get away safely. She, more than Alex, understood the situation at Baxton Hall; therefore she had no intention of leaving all the planning up to him. One scheme after another filtered through her head and was rejected. The gray light of dawn had crept into her room when a wild idea presented itself to her, one so fantastic that Marina almost laughed aloud. But it would mean taking Gwen Porter into her confidence.

"So . . . what will you be doing today, wife?" Stafford inquired at breakfast.

Marina glanced up quickly to find his small eyes resting suspiciously on her face, suspicion that Edgar lacked the subtlety to conceal.

She stifled a yawn, replying casually, "Oh, there's the jam to attend to. It will have set by now, so I suppose I must go down and fetch it back. It will mean taking the horse and cart."

"Judd will go with you."

Hiding her dismay, Marina nodded. "I'll warrant he'll be glad to help when there'll be new-made sweet stuff at the end of it."

Her husband studied her intently for a moment but he could find nothing unusual about her that morning. "You spoil the men as you spoil the child," he said. "Why should the servants have sweetmeats? Sugar is expensive."

"Ah, there's more than enough of it to go around,

and a little sweetness will improve their temper. You said yourself that they are always grumbling about the food."

Edgar studied her for a moment longer, then stood up and buckled on his belt, thinking that Marina seemed in a better mood this morning. Perhaps his threat to send the child away had done the trick, made her realize that it would be prudent to be a little pleasanter to her husband in the hope that he would change his mind. Well, he thought, all to the good, all to the good. A woman needed a fright now and then to keep her biddable, this one more than most.

Just before nine o'clock in the morning Marina rode down to Brokenbridge with Judd in the cart. "This might take a little time," she told him when they drew up in the farmyard. "You can go down to the barns to talk to the men and I'll call for you when I'm ready to go home."

Gwen was pleased to see her, as usual. "Oh, you *do* look better this morning!" she smiled.

Marina nodded. "I've found a wonderful tonic."

16

In the afternoon Alexander arrived early for his tryst with Marina at the ruined priory. He had a plan of escape carefully worked out. Two o'clock came and went, and still he waited. It was a brilliantly sunny day, but among the tumbled stones of the ruin all was shadowy and still, except for the humming of the bees around the wildflowers that had sprung up in places where the broken roof allowed light and sunshine to penetrate. A few trees had also taken root in the open patches, some grown quite tall through the years, the best of them a century-old beech with satiny, silver-gray bark that had pushed its way up through the building, its spreading branches the cause of even more destruction a triumph of nature over stone and mortar.

To pass the time and distract himself, Alex walked about examining

what was left of the priory. The stones had been cut from pink sandstone, mellow

against the green of the countryside around, and some had been carved into designs and pictures—angels, wheat sheaves, birds, and flowers. He gazed up at what was left of a vaulted window, its delicate tracery pierced with the vibrant blue of the sky. It was a hushed, haunted place, yet filled with a deep sense of peace in contrast to the man waiting inside it.

Alex returned to the main doorway. Downhill, the town of Wilton nestled in a valley, the peak of a church spire glinting in the sun. In the stillness he could hear the noise from the fairground, the music, the shouts of the hawkers plying their wares, the occasional whinny of a horse, bursts of laughter.

The old turnpike winding uphill from Wilton to the priory was little used, except as a cattle track on market days, and when a few moments after three o'clock Alex spotted a rider approaching, his heart gave a surge of relief. She had come! He hadn't been sure she would. But he had meant it when he told Marina that he would give her only until tomorrow, Saturday, to make up her mind. Many would say he was rash indeed in coming back into England, but he wasn't quite the reckless young fool he had once been, nor had he any intention of risking his life in another lost cause. He felt that he owed Marina something and could not have rested until he discovered how she fared, but after this if she should decide not to join him his responsibility for her welfare would end.

Alex's eyes narrowed as he watched the rider come closer. He could see now that it was indeed a woman, and a smile touched his lips, though in truth, now that he had met Marina again, he could not have said for certain if his feelings for her were the same as they once had been. It had been more than three years ago and they had been little more than children then, filled with lofty idealistic and, he now realized, unrea-

listic notions about life. Together they had embarked on a daring and dangerous adventure, and the excitement of it had colored everything, even their perceptions about each other. All that had changed.

The figure was riding a mule. Under her dark blue gown her shape seemed stout, and though it must have been a trick of the light, her hair was dark . . .

Alex gave a start of dismay. It wasn't Marina! He ducked back inside the priory and concealed himself behind a section of tumbled wall. Straining his ears, he heard her dismount and mutter something to the mule, then her footsteps entering the building.

"My Lord Sinclair," she called out softly, peering into the gloom. "Alexander? Are you here, sir? I've come for Marina."

He stepped out where she could see him, and for a moment they stood facing each other in silence. Gwen Porter's heart skipped a beat when she found herself staring into the ruthless dark features of the devilish man she had been so frightened of at the fair. There was an instant when she almost turned and ran.

"Who are you?" he asked her.

Gwen moistened her lips. "I'm Marina's friend, Gwen Porter."

"What has happened?" His voice was harsh with anxiety. "Why didn't she come herself?"

Gwen relaxed a little when she saw how concerned he was. Looks are deceiving, she soothed herself. She threw a nervous glance back the way she had come, then waved to the rear of the building. "Best we go down there," she suggested, "then I shall tell you everything, but I haven't much time. 'Tis unsafe for me to tarry long."

They concealed themselves in what was left of the priory storehouse, seated side by side in the semidarkness. Gwen began by assuring Alexander, "She means

to go with you, my lord." Her plump cheeks glowed with excitement and her nut-brown eyes were shining, so delighted yet scared too was she with the role she had been cast in, that of assisting the two lovers to come together again. It was just what she had envisioned for the beautiful Marina all along! Though she examined Alex doubtfully he wasn't *quite* the prince she had had in mind for her friend. Sinclair looked more like a smuggler or pirate or brigand of some sort; his dark face had that ruthless hard cast to it. Still, Gwen had to concede that he had dazzling green eyes and that the Satanic aura about him was oddly thrilling. Furthermore, there was his title, his nobility to consider. That alone was worth a lot.

Gwen inhaled sharply and clasped her hands tightly together; she was breathless with the intoxication of it all, the drama that had come into

her rather dull, predictable life. Aye, and she was ready and able to cope with it too, in spite of the fact that Sinclair was now gazing at her so doubtfully, even with a hint of amusement in those pantherlike eyes. Gwen was quite prepared to demonstrate that she was a person to be reckoned with, one worthy of being taken seriously.

"I will tell you of our plan," she said proudly.

Sinclair's amusement vanished. "What plan?"

"The one whereby Marina and Clare can escape."

"What!" Raw alarm sprang into his eyes. He stared at her as if she were mad. "What are you talking about, mistress? The planning will be left to *me*"

"Nay." Gwen put a hand on his arm. "You must hear me out, sir. Consider carefully what I say, and me thinks you will not fail to see the sense in it. 'Tis beautifully simple, yet for all that, mayhap the only way this can succeed."

Alex didn't know what to make of her, though his instincts told him that Gwen Porter was a woman who

was game for anything. She had, after all, embroiled herself in a situation that could land her in personal danger. She had walked boldly into the priory ruins, oftentimes the lair of tramps and disreputables, to confront a total stranger. So Alexander politely listened to her, though with absolutely no intention of pursuing a scheme concocted by two women who had neither the experience nor knowledge of such things for their idea to stand the slightest chance of succeeding. But after a few minutes he began to pay her closer attention.

"You see, I'm a midwife," Gwen explained. "I have access to certain essences, certain tinctures not available to the public at large, substances used to dull the pain of labor, even to render a patient unconscious if the circumstances should merit it. 'Twas this that gave Marina the idea in the first place."

"She thought of this?" Alex shook his head. "Dear Christ"

"Now you listen to me, sir." Gwen's hand tightened on his arm and her voice assumed a no-nonsense ring, a tone her own husband knew better than to ignore. "I presume you want to see Marina and the baby

brought out of Baxton Hall with as little risk to them as possible?"

"Obviously. But"

"Then this is the only way," she stated firmly. "Her husband is already suspicious, which is the reason Marina couldn't come here today herself. She was afraid she would lead him to you because he is having her watched." Gwen paused to study his tight, skeptical face, then warned him, "Stafford is just evil enough to kill both Marina and the child at the first sniff of trouble, so if you have a mind to go in there with pistols blazing you could end up with their deaths on your conscience."

Alex jumped up and began to pace about. He could not actually say that the proposed plan was ludicrous because it was well thought out and clever in many ways. Aye, he conceded grudgingly, and it stood as good a chance of working as any . . . perhaps better than most. In fact, he found himself admiring the women for its cunning and simplicity. But, God's soul, how could he stand by and allow these females to handle it, to take such a risk on their own? What kind of man did they think he was?

Alex turned to the woman who was watching him expectantly.

"The plan is sound," he allowed, "but I must have a hand in it. I will"

"*Your* part in it," she cut in determinedly, "is to have horses waiting in the woods and make sure they are swift."

He raised his head haughtily, obviously affronted to be spoken to in such an imperious manner, to be ordered about by a woman, and to be expected to take a secondary role when he had been born to lead rather than be led.

His abduracy heightened Gwen's nervousness, for Sinclair *must* be made to agree to it. It was too late now to call a halt to it. They had to act while the time was ripe.

"Sir," she said, standing up, "Marina has already taken the jam loaded with poppy juice back to Baxton Hall. It will be fed to the men tonight at supper."

His head snapped up, his heart leaping with it.

"Aye," Gwen nodded, "it cannot be stopped."

Marina watched anxiously for her friend from her chamber window, and when she spied Gwen approaching on the mule, she ran outside into the courtyard and the two women hurried deep into the garden where there was less chance of anyone eavesdropping. Stopping in the shade of some huge rhododendron bushes, Marina turned to her breathlessly. "Well, what did he say?"

She was not too surprised in fact not surprised at all to hear that Alex had been opposed to the idea of the women handling it themselves, though, said Gwen with some satisfaction, he thought the plan itself might work if he were in charge of it.

"That cannot be." Marina brushed the notion aside. "But will he do his part in it?"

Her friend nodded slowly, and decided against telling Marina how angry Alex had been that they'd gone ahead before consulting him; but, as Gwen had

sensed, he had been far more anxious for them than anything else. With a quick glance around, she opened the flaps of a heavy bag she was carrying, and Marina's eyes widened when she peeped inside. Inside were four bottles of Gwen's homemade elderberry wine and, under them, a pistol and a dagger.

"I stopped on my way here for the wine," said Gwen very low. " 'Tis added insurance. The brew is well larded with poppy juice."

"You dearest angel." Marina smiled, taking the bag. "Oh, Gwen, how will I ever be able to thank you for all you've done for me? But for you, I think I would have been in Newcastle madhouse long since."

"Welladay, hopefully you will soon be in paradise," the other said with a giggle. "I admit that at first sight of him I was not sure, but the more you study him the more you realize that there's something about that devil . . ."

They laughed softly together, as they had done so many times before, but as the shadows lengthened across the grass and the afternoon sun slid behind the largest of the barns, their mirth died slowly away. Soon the men would be riding home for supper, and both knew that Marina had things to prepare before they arrived.

It was time to say goodbye.

"I will miss you, sweeting." There was a tremor in Gwen's voice.

A gush of tears filled Marina's eyes but she struggled to hold her smile. Catching Gwen's hand and squeezing it, she said, "We will see each other again, I swear! Some day you will visit me in Scotland, and I shall come to see you whenwhen"

"when the old weasel has the grace to expire?"

Half-laughing, half-crying, they hugged each other fiercely.

Gwen kissed her on the cheek, murmuring, "God keep you and little Clare," then she hurried away.

The house servants liked their mistress. Though the master was frequently harsh and kept them on the barest rations, mostly scraps left over from the Hall table, his goodwife was always fair and slipped them an extra something when she could. But when Marina came into the kitchen and slapped down two pots of jam and even a bottle of wine on the old work table, they gaped in astonishment.

She winked at them and put a finger over her mouth, whispering conspiratorially, "Make sure not to touch this until after the master has been served his meal, then wolf the lot before he pokes his nose in the door and catches you."

They grinned, loud in their thanks.

"And Betsy"she handed a basket to the young housemaid"when you hear my husband step into the house, run out with this to the men, and make sure they get it, mind," she warned. "Instruct them to finish everything so that I can pick up the empty jars in the morning."

Edgar's guards ate their meals in the bothy behind the stables, and Marina could appreciate how much they would enjoy their treat since they were forever complaining about the food, or the lack of it, and with good reason. Paltry wages and near-starvation rations accounted for a constant turnover of staffbut, as Stafford had once pointed out when Marina urged that he be a little more generous, "Better to be a little hungry with a roof over your head than to be starving out in the rain."

In her chamber Marina quickly bathed and put on her prettiest gown,

then sat at the spotted mirror to brush out her hair, tying it back with a pink satin

ribbon. Taking a jar of jam from the nearby table, she very carefully smeared a little at the corner of her mouth, though not close enough to be accidentally licked. Then she sat back and stared at herself and was suddenly heart-stoppingly nervous, though up until now she had been amazingly composed.

She frowned at her reflection severely. "Marina," she told herself, "you simply cannot lose your nerve now. Blessed Jesu . . . *not now!*"

She put the cap back on the jam jar, inhaled raggedly several times, then rose and hurried down the corridor to the nursery, where she found her daughter playing "hunt the thimble" with her nurse-maid, Jillie. Marina joined their game for a few minutes, then when Clare tired of it and went in search of her favorite doll, she took Jillie aside and pressed the jar of jam into her hand. It was for her, Marina stressed. Clare must have none tonight lest it upset her stomach before she went to bed, and when the girl's face fell, "Don't worry, she will make up for it tomorrow."

Jillie beamed. "Oh, you *are* kind, lady."

Marina explained about the need for it to be consumed tonight so that she could return the jar to Mistress Porter in the morning, and the nursemaid chuckled, " 'Twill be gone in the twinkling of an eye."

Stafford returned to the house a little later than usual. He'd had a hard day on his estate. He stamped in muttering under his breath about the lazy serfs who worked his fields, the constant poaching of his tenants, and the fact that two of his sheep were missing, undoubtedly nicked by gypsies in retaliation for what he and his neighbors had done to their friends.

He gave a start when he turned around and saw Marina. She was seated at the board in her best pink

silk gown. A bottle of wine stood on the table, and two glasses had already been poured out. Hers, he saw, was almost empty.

Startled, he inquired suspiciously, "What's ado here?" And with a wave at her finery, then at the wine, "What means all this?"

Marina threw him one of her lazy, seductive smiles. "Good eve to you, husband. Me thought you would never come home, and the very night when I had a festive meal prepared for you. Come"she waved to the chair opposite"sit you down. I see you look weary this night. 'Tis a pity, for I thought we might walk down to visit the Porters after supper."

His brows came down and he fairly gaped at her. Visit the Porters? Never before had she shown any desire to go anywhere with him. And never before had she deigned to dress up for him either. It occurred to Stafford that the best thing he had ever done as far as Marina was concerned was to threaten to separate her from the child. That, he told himself, was the way to make her biddable: hint about sending Clare away. And he would, too, if Marina continued to provoke him.

"Methinks you are drunk," he said, unbuckling his belt before throwing himself down across from her at the table. "You had no right to open this wine without my permission."

She explained that Gwen Porter had made it, adding with a giggle, "Ah, 'tis fair week, Edgar, cannot we make merry a little?"

"I've had a wearisome day."

Marina held her breath when he picked up his glass of wine and carelessly tossed it back, then thumped the table shouting for the servants to bring in the meal. She pretended to eat herself while watching him covertly from under her lids, waiting tensely for the

wine to take effect, but as usual he pounced on the food and ate with gusto, displaying no sign whatever that the narcotic was having the slightest effect on him. With the main course consumed, he drew a berry tart toward him, cut it in half, and shoveled it onto his trencher, then ladled on spoonfuls of jam from the jar at his elbow.

His eyes flickered to her, and with a nod at the jam, he ordered, "See that the servants get none of this."

"More wine, husband?" Her hand shook a little as she reached for the bottle.

"Aye, but none for you, lady; you've had enough. Jam too, from that spot by your lips. I trow you are as greedy as a street urchin. 'Tis a wonder you left any for me."

Greedy! Marina was seized with a fit of hysterical laughter at the incongruity of his remark considering his own gluttony, and so tense was she that she couldn't quite choke it back. But she covered it by saying, "Oh, Edgar, what funny remarks you make. There's lots of jam, so eat your fill."

As if he needed any encouragement!

In dread fascination Marina watched him swallow three glasses of wine, eat half a jar of jam, and polish off most of the pie, and still nothing. Her hopes plummeted. It wasn't going to work! And if it failed to work for Edgar, there was an excellent chance that it wouldn't for the servants, or more importantly, his men. In the meantime, Alexander would be waiting impatiently in the woods with the horses. If she didn't meet him within the hour plenty of time for the opium to take effect, Gwen had assured them he might get alarmed for her safety and come to the house to investigate!

She broke out in a cold sweat, panic rising. Oh, God, she moaned inwardly, Alex would find himself

walking into a lions' den, there to be pounced on and destroyed. Realizing it had been a plot, Stafford would make her and the baby pay for it. Even poor, obliging Gwen could be hurt; Edgar was malicious and vindictive. He had never forgiven the Percys for wedding him to a girl who had run away from him which had hardly been their fault and had gone out of his way to strike back at them ever since.

Shaking, Marina grabbed what was left of the wine and made to pour it into his glass, but he pushed her hand away. "Nay, nay . . . had enough." Stafford tugged at the neck of his shirt. " 'Tis hothot as Hades in here . . ."

Marina stared at him, her breath catching in her throat.

Their eyes met. His were glittering. His face had gone very red and his skin was shiny with perspiration. "You . . ." he muttered, "you . . . bitch . . ."

Then he toppled sideways off his chair, landing with a dull thud on the floor.

For a moment Marina froze. She was almost sick with terror and her limbs wouldn't function. It was as if she had been turned to stone. But

gradually she became aware of the silence in the house, the only sound the ticking of the clock, and that ticking had a frantic ring to it, warning her that time was passing and that she didn't have very long. An hour, Gwen had said, before the younger, stronger ones would start to wake up only an hour to get out of the house and leave the district!

Marina sprang to her feet as life rushed back into her limbs. With a glance at Edgar who lay snoring softly with his mouth wide open, she tiptoed down the passageway and peeped into the kitchen. Two of the servants were slumped with their heads on the table, an overturned jar of jam beside them, and the pot-boy

had collapsed near the pantry door. Darby, who ate with them, was on the floor.

Flying upstairs, she came upon Jillie in her tiny back bedchamber. To her horror the girl was not completely drugged, though she too was lying on the floor, the jam jar beside her. When she saw Marina she tried to rise, tried to speak, but her mistress had no time to listen. " 'Twill soon pass, never fear," was all she had time to say before racing to the nursery to pluck Clare from her bed, snatching a blanket to wrap around her.

In minutes she was at the front door on her way out of the house.

The night was dark and still, the courtyard empty. With a wary glance around, Marina raced like a shadow across the cobbles, the child in her arms. Her breath came in quick little spurts, like a winded horse, and her flesh was clammy cold, but the gate loomed up ahead of her, and once through it, she would be free, or almost so. Then it would only be a matter of running for the woods where Alex would be waiting with the horses.

Marina had reached the gate when a figure stepped out from the bush beside it. The suddenness of it almost caused her to drop the child.

" 'Tis as well I don't fancy sweet things," said Tar, grinning.

When Tar pounced on her, Marina went berserk, aware that she was fighting for her future perhaps even for her life itself. Hampered by Clare in her arms, she clutched the little girl against her and kicked,

twisted, bit, and did everything she could short of using her hands to free herself, and actually managed to break away from him once and stagger a few steps to the gate. Tar bounded after her and grabbed her by the hair and started dragging her back to the house, the child whimpering, Marina pleading with him to release her. "Nay," the squire panted, " 'twould be more than my life's worth to let you go"

He stopped abruptly as a shadow fell across them in the torchlight by the door. Still holding Marina by the hair, Tar started to wheel about when he was struck a stunning blow to the back of the head, so strong it sent sparks shooting before his eyes like an explosion in a

dark sky. All the power went out of his limbs and he felt himself falling, plunging headlong into a black abyss, landing with a thump at Marina's feet. For an instant she went numb. She gazed down stupidly at her husband's squire, then up into Alexander's shadowy face.

"Give me the babe!" he said, and plucked the little girl from her arms and threw Clare over his shoulders. Catching Marina by the arm, he ran with her to the gate. "Hurry!" he urged when she stumbled. "There are horses waiting in the woods."

Five minutes later they were galloping away for the Scottish border, much as they had done once before. This time, Marina prayed, she hoped she would never see Edgar Stafford again.

There was no question of stopping, even for a moment. Alex knew that Tar would recover from the blow soon enough, and though his master might not wake up so soon, the squire would be bound to rouse the sheriff to give chase. Although Alex felt confident of being able to outride a posse himself, he knew that Marina could not keep up such a furious pace.

They rode on through the night, desperate to put as much distance between themselves and Baxton Hall as possible before Tar recovered his senses, and in a remarkably short time crossed the border into Scotland. But even then it was unwise to slow down. Raiding parties from both countries had little compunction about crossing over in either direction. Stafford certainly wouldn't, Alex was sure, when he revived to find his wife and child gone. So they rode on deeper into Scotland, past Jedburgh and pushing steadily north, Alex with one arm around the little girl seated on the saddle in front of him, her tiny body held close against his, her head lolling sideways.

In their mad desire to get away, neither adult thought much of Clare's silence at first, their main fear centered on those who might be following them. It was when they reached the town of Melrose, where they spied torches glowing in the darkness, that Marina began to feel safe enough to think of other things besides possible capture. She brought her horse close to Alexander's and called to him, "How is it with Clare?" Leaning forward in the saddle, Marina felt a twinge of concern when she noticed her daughter's head sagging against her father's chest.

"Alex"her voice sharpened with alarm"stop over yonder by the lights. I would see how Clare is faring."

They drew up beside Melrose Inn, where a flare was burning on a bracket beside the main door. Dismounting, Alex carried the little girl to the front steps and both bent over her. Sinclair grinned. "Faith, but the bairn is a sound sleeper."

"Clare, my love." Anxiously Marina examined the little face. "Clare, wake up!"

When there was no response, the worried mother leaned closer and saw the sticky smudges on her daughter's lips, telltale stains that she hadn't noticed in her frantic haste to get them both safely out of Baxton Hall. She raised stricken eyes to Alexander's face. "Jesu . . . she has eaten some of the jam." A wave of horror rose inside her. "She's dead! Oh, dear God, my baby is dead!" Crying hysterically, she plucked the child from Alex and crushed her limp little body against her breast, rocking her distractedly while anguished tears splashed down her face.

Alex ran up the steps to the inn and almost battered the door down to rouse the occupants. "A doctor!" he cried when a suspicious face peered out at him. "We

have a sick child here," with a wave back down the steps. "A doctor, man!" He grabbed the innkeeper by the scruff of the neck. "Where can one be found?"

There was no doctor to be had in Melrose but a barber responded to the emergency, a man who lived up to the letter of his trade. To Marina and Alex his methods seemed barbarous indeed as he rushed Clare into a room at the inn. In his late thirties, Janton had the lean, swarthy look of a gypsy, but they saw at once that he was a fellow who totally concentrated on the task at hand; he had been highly

recommended to them by the innkeeper, not that they had a choice. It was Janton or nothing. The moment the fellow established that a thin thread of life still flickered in little Clare, he ordered a tub of cold water brought to the room. In the meantime, he ripped the babe's clothes off and, ignoring the startled exclamations from her parents, proceeded to slap every inch of her body.

When two servitors struggled in with the tub of cold water, Janton plunged the child into the tub.

"Christ's Holy Mother" Alex started to lunge at him when the innkeeper pulled him back, muttering, "Nay, nay, it looks more fearsome than it is. The wean must be shocked oot o' it, ye see. Janton kens weel how to handle opium eaters. The Laird o' Buccleugh's ain son is yin o' them and requires the barber's services frequently."

So the parents stood helplessly aside while their daughter was slapped, plunged into the water, and slapped again, Janton pausing now and then to cock an ear to her mouth or press it against her chest. "Oh, God . . ." Marina wailed when the untender treatment didn't seem to be having any effect. "Dear Lord, please spare her."

Alexander put his arm around her quivering shoul-

ders and with his hand brought her face against his chest, holding it there so she wouldn't have to watch. He knew now beyond the shadow of a doubt that baby Clare was his; the child was a tiny miniature of his own mother, the Countess of Belrose and Kilgarin. In fact, the resemblance was uncanny. And how proud Lady Alyssa would have been of her too!

A terrible bleakness struck Alexander as he watched Janton struggle to save the life of his daughter, the first of the new generation of Sinclairs. Had he met her only to lose her on the same day? Was this to be the final price he would pay for his youthful folly? He would sooner have died on the Tower Green, if *his* life could have been taken in place of his little daughter's.

He put his face against the top of Marina's head and closed his eyes then gave a start when he heard a faint, mewling cry.

The innkeeper laughed triumphantly. "There now! Did a' no' tell ye he was guid?"

Marina and Alex rushed to the bed where Janton was bending over

Clare, tapping her cheek none too gently. Dripping, her velvety skin inflamed and swollen from her rough "treatment," she looked for all the world like a kitten that had just been hauled out of a pond. They held their breaths when the long, curling lashes fluttered open to reveal a pair of dazed green eyes. "Mama . . ." she wailed weakly, and began to cry.

"Oh, thank God!" Marina wept. "Thank you, Blessed Mary."

Janton stepped back to allow the sobbing mother to take her child in her arms, but his face was grim when he straightened up and looked at Alex, who was grinning with relief, his eyes tender as they rested on Marina and his daughter. They made a beautiful

picture together, hugging, kissing, Marina murmuring soothing endearments into the tiny, wet ear. It was with a start that he turned his attention to Janton when the man put a hand on his arm, indicating that they should step outside into the hall. Once there, the barber eyed him grimly.

"The wee one should be all right now," he assured the worried father, "but had she consumed more of the poppy she would never have survived. How came she by such a substance?"

It was an impertinent question, but Alexander was too overcome with relief and gratitude to take offense, nor was he thinking very clearly at that moment, half his attention still in the other room. He would have seized the barber's hand and wrung it heartily, but the man kept his hands clasped behind his back. Then Alex became aware of the man's anger, and his own warm smile faded.

The fellow thought he was an opium eater!

During his time at Elizabeth's court and even at his own King's court in Edinburgh, he had known a few people who, jaded with other pleasures, had turned to the juice of the poppy for stimulation. The young Lord Bothwell was one of them, and there had been a bard at the English court who had written weird and outlandish verses when in the thrall of it, but in the main, opium was used by surgeons and midwives to banish pain or induce sleep.

"'Twas an accident," Alex explained. "It came from the medicaments of a midwife." Which was true enough. "I know not how it found its way into the hands of the babe."

Janton nodded; Alex couldn't tell if he believed him or not.

" 'Tis a deadly intoxicant and soul-destroying if

taken regularly," said the barber. "It can also kill. Best to keep such substances well removed from the grasp of children"

"We do not use it, man." Sinclair was growing a little angry.

Janton nodded. "That I am glad to hear, because many do, to their sorrow. Once set on that downward path 'tis nigh impossible to pull them back. Soon they leave the world behind and sink into a land of dark dreams and then into hell itself." The barber, who had two male patients in that very statethe sons of noblemenfelt it his duty to point out the effects of the poppy to everyone he met that he felt might be at risk; people with the means to procure opium.

But Alex was impatient to return to Marina and Clare, nor was he in the mood to listen to a stern lecture, regardless of how well intended. He thrust out his hand, and after a moment's hesitation, Janton took it.

"My deepest thanks to you, sir," said Alex. "You are indeed a man of rare skills." He smiled slightly. "Methinks you are wasting your talents barbering."

Janton smiled a little too. Only rarely now did he spend his time shaving customers and cutting hair. He had attracted the attention of professors at Glasgow's School of Medicine through his work with the Laird of Buccleugh's ailing son and the nephew of Baron Roxburgh, for not only did he understand that there was a dark side to medicines then in common use, but he was also an able surgeon and clever at mixing his own remedies for disease. But he had been born poor, the son of a barber, and had never had any formal education, yet for all that his natural skill had been recognized and now, urged on by Buccleugh, he had been invited to Glasgow to set up his own infirmary

ward. Janton still hadn't made up his mind whether to accept, held back by something he had overheard one eminent professor remark to another during his last visit to Glasgow. "I trow this fellow Janton is a wizard and has some evil pact established with Lucifer. How else can one explain the efficacy of his cures?"

The barber suspected he might be safer staying in Melrose.

Alexander would gladly have given him all the gold in his possession, but Janton shook his head. "My fee," he said, "is one florin."

Alex was startled. It seemed a small price to pay for the life of his child.

For what was left of the night Marina would not be parted from her daughter, who was sleeping naturally now after having supped a few spoonfuls of broth. It was sheer joy to Marina to be able to lie in bed with Clare's warm little body held tight in her arms, her soft breath against her mother's cheek, her face flushed once more with health.

Alex stood watching them for a while, thinking again that they made a lovely picture, and beautiful they both were too his women. It pleased him to be able to admire them at leisure, now that all the frantic activity had died down and everyone gone back to bed. Clare was doll-like and perfect in her father's eyes, and though Marina looked wan and exhausted, worn out with the activity of the last few hectic hours, still . . . even fatigue could not detract from her beauty. That beauty still held him enthralled.

Finally he walked to the bed and stooped down to kiss them both on the forehead. "Sleep now," he urged softly. "We have a long ride to face tomorrow. Janton assured me that it was safe for Clare to be

moved, that the fresh air and exercise would only improve her condition."

Marina at last took her anxious eyes from her baby, and glanced up at him. It was then she noticed that Alexander too looked weary, the marks of the strain they had undergone on his face. She reached out her hand to him, saying, "Oh, my lord, are we not lucky? To have made it safely out of England, then to have weathered this crisis with Clare. I warrant that it was her nursemaid who gave her the jam. Jillie was fond of Clare and unable to refuse her anything." Her face clouded. "I should have remembered that, but in my haste to get away . . ."

"Marina," Alex said and sat down on the edge of the bed beside her, "'tis foolish to blame yourself. You did what had to be done, and I'm proud of you." He smiled. "You are brave and clever as well as being beautiful."

Marina glowed at his praise. She felt deliriously happy. And now was just the moment to give him a wonderful piece of news, though she was sorry now at having lied to him before and hoped Alex wouldn't hold it against her.

"Well," she said, "what do you think of our Clare?"

"Oh, I knew she was mine the instant I laid eyes on her," Alex said, taking her aback. "Clare is the very image of my lady mother. The countess too has that same burnished red hair and the same upward tilt to her eyes. And hers too are green."

Now, finally, Marina knew where her daughter's fiery hair had come from, something that had always puzzled her and something she would never have known if she hadn't decided to put her trust in Alex once again. She was suddenly very curious about the Sinclairs, Alex's mother in particular. "She must be

very beautiful if Clare takes after her?"

"Very beautiful," he said proudly, affection in his voice.

"Alex, I'm most anxious to know how it goes with dear Sir Ralph?" Now that they were more relaxed, this was only the first of many questions Marina yearned to ask him. It came as a great blow to her to learn that her old friend had died. Tears started up in her eyes, but her voice was fierce when she said, "And 'twas that husband of mine who caused it when he barged into Cairnmore House that day!"

It all came out then, how she had become very close to Ralph while waiting for Alex to return, then how Elsie Cairnmore, upon discovering that Marina was pregnant, had promised to help her. "Then one day, out of the blue, Edgar arrived at the house with his men. There was a scuffle when Ralph tried to fight him off, but he was weak, you see, and quickly overpowered. The last I saw of your grandfather he was lying across his bed, then . . . Edgar dragged me away."

Alex brushed the tears from her cheeks and put his arm around her, then casually lay down on the bed beside her, his fingers lazily moving through her hair. "I'm sure you made the last months of his life very happy, Marina. Stafford might have hastened his end, but my grandfather had been ailing for some time."

Marina turned her wet face to his. "I cannot imagine how Edgar ever

found me."

"I can," he replied grimly. "Garth and Elsie must have written to him"

"Garth and Elsie! But . . . Elsie swore she would help me with the babe."

"Elsie is a conniving viper. I knew they were lying when I stopped in Ayrshire on my way South. Nay, Marina, they have always resented anyone, including

me, getting too close to their pot of goldSir Ralphfearing, doubtless, that he might leave them something in his will. Greed was ever the motivating force with that pair."

Both were silent for a moment while Clare stirred in her sleep, then Alex eyed her quizzically. "So you've decided to trust me again, eh, Marina?"

"I am here, am I not?" She was blushing.

"Why, of a sudden, did you change your mind?"

Marina turned her head away from the probing green eyes and lay gazing up at the ceiling, remembering the exact moment the decision to go with Alex had firmed in her mindthe night Edgar announced his intention of sending Clare away. But . . . perhaps the decision had been made even before that, though she hadn't confronted it until then, hadn't been ready to admit to herself that Alexander Sinclair still meant something to her. The question was, what did *she* mean to Alexander Sinclair? Had *she* brought him back into Englandor her child?

"I was miserable at Baxton Hall," Marina replied evasively, afraid to commit herself until he did. "And I felt that Clare should be with her real father."

"And that is the only reason?"

Her flush deepened, but Marina felt slightly annoyed. What did Alex expect her to say? That she still loved him? He was asking a lot, she thought irritably, when he kept his own feelings to himself. After all, the fact that a man was willing and ready to bed a woman didn't necessarily mean that he loved her, and besides, they had both changed a lot during the past three years. Lust aside, and she was

quite prepared to face up to the fact that Sinclair still excited her physically, Marina was uncertain as to the extent of her feelings for him as Alex seemed to be about her.

"Is that not a good enough reason?" she finally replied diffidently. "A child needs its father."

He laughed softly, watching her, and reaching out, ran the backs of his fingers over the smooth curve of her cheek. "Well I recall when this was black and blue," he murmured, stroking her. "Now 'tis pink and soft as a rose. But you are right in saying that a child should be with its real father. I can see that you are very concerned for your daughter's welfare," he finished mockingly.

Marina glanced at him from the corner of her eye to find Alex grinning at her. Well he knew that there was more to it than that! she thought, irked that he could see through her so easily.

"Well," she said, "I perceive that three years in prison hasn't dented your confidence in yourself. You still have as high an opinion of yourself as ever, my Lord Sinclair."

His dark brows rose. "You do me an injustice, Mistress Marina." But there was laughter in his eyes. "Admit you are glad you came?"

She ignored the question and asked briskly, "Well, sir, where are you taking us now that you have us in your clutches?"

He had many choices of location his hunting lodge near the Moray Firth, or even Kilgarin Keep, a property that had come to him nearly four years ago on his twenty-first birthday. Then there was Lynnwood, a pleasant Sinclair estate not too far from Castle Augusta itself. Alex was still unsure about the position that Marina would occupy in his life . . . but a man rarely took his mistress into the bosom of his family.

His mind, however, had been made up the moment he'd clapped eyes on Clare.

"We are going to Castle Augusta," he told her. "My daughter must meet her family."

Marina was taken aback. Somehow Castle Augusta was the last place she expected. She knew from conversations with Alex in the past that

it was the seat of the clan Sinclair and she couldn't help but be nervous, wondering how they would receive her there. She was, after all, an English woman and married, and to have her foisted on them by their eldest son of course Alexander wasn't the heir, Marina remembered. Though they would expect him too to make an advantageous marriage, it wasn't quite as imperative as it was with the son who would inherit.

"Ah . . . do you think that's wise, Alex?"

He studied her for a moment, his face sober and determined.

"Have courage, Marina, my parents will understand; they should, having once been in a similar position themselves. 'Tis amazing," he mused, "how history repeats itself."

Marina gave him a doubtful look, remembering the circumstances of his birth, but she didn't say anything, reasoning that he knew best what he was about.

When Clare turned restlessly in her sleep, perhaps disturbed by their voices, though they had been speaking very low, Alex kissed her lightly on the cheek. Then he rose, saying, "Well, I shall leave you two ladies alone. Our next stop, providing that Clare seems fit to travel in the morning, will be Edinburgh."

Clare seemed fit for anything in the morning. She jumped up bright and early asking for her breakfast, startled to find herself in a strange room, and this led to numerous questions, her quick mind as well as her body seeming none the worse for her accident.

They spent two days in Edinburgh, mainly to outfit Marina and Clare as they had fled from Baxton Hall with nothing but the clothes on their backs, and Alex was determined that they should look their best when he presented them to his family. It meant purchasing ready-made garments, which were always inferior to those specially made, but there was no help for it. Alex had no desire to tarry in the city lest he run into his friends at court, none of whom he wished to see at that particular moment. It was for a similar reason that he avoided Clairmont, the Sinclair town house in Edinburgh, and popular eating establishments such as Bell's Tavern and the Rotunda, haunts of the rich, famous, and well-connected. Above all, word must not reach King James that he was back in town, for then awkward questions might be asked. James in many ways was a peaceable, tolerant man, but Alexander felt it would be stretching that tolerance if the King

discovered that he had gone back into England illegally.

Marina and Clare were delighted with their new clothes. For Marina there was a crimson riding habit in finest serge, and a billowing mist-blue satin gown with silvery tracing at the dipping neckline, a garment that Alex insisted she take, admiring the way the design drew attention to Marina's high, lush breasts. And, of course, she must have the silvery-blue ankle-length cloak that matched the gown, and day frocks in linen and muslin, in soft shades of peach and green, and boots to go with the riding habit, and two pairs of slippers, one for the evening gown and the other for the more casual attire.

"Stop!" Marina laughed when Alex kept plucking item after item off the rack, while the astonished owner of the shop stood nodding enthusiastically, a

delighted grin on her face, constantly assuring the generous gentleman, "Aye, m'lord, that's just the sort of thing they are wearing at court." Or, "If you would have the lady be in fashion, I'd suggest the lace shawl, or mayhap those ivory combs. And scent, of course; none of the high-born ladies go abroad without it these days . . ."

Staring at the pile of merchandise, including almost as much for Clare, Marina put her hands to her burning cheeks, crying, "Marry, but we shall need a cart to transport all this to Augusta! Oh Alex" her sparkling brown eyes met his "I've never owned so many clothes in my life!"

"Take the riding habit and one other now," he told her, smiling, thinking that she looked more like the vivacious Marina he had once known, "and we can have the rest sent on to Augusta."

They left the shop with Alex holding Clare in one arm and carrying the packages in the other, Marina hanging on to his sleeve. "I feel much like one of the pampered ladies in that castle up yonder," she said, waving to Edinburgh Castle on its massive rock high above the street. "Thank you, Alex," she said shyly.

"Thank you, Alex," little Clare echoed, and both adults burst out laughing, both thankful that the child seemed none the worse for her accident. Far from it, she seemed to thrive on the long trip north, showing an active interest in everything, constantly pointing at things and demanding to know what they were. She seemed to accept Alexander too, stranger as he was to her, and Marina thought she knew why. Because of the harsh conditions at Baxton Hall, none of

Edgar's houseguard had ever lasted very long, and when one man left or more likely, was sacked a new one would take his place. Clare had become used to the

rapid turnover and constant change of faces, so that this man, big, dark, and bearded though he was, just the type who might frighten any small child, didn't seem to bother Clare.

But the first time she called him Alex, Sinclair took her onto his knee and spoke to her gravely. "A wee lass like you should not call her sire by his first name. Do you think you can remember to call me Father?"

"Aye, Alex," she'd nodded.

"Nay, my love. *Father*."

Her big green eyes stared into his and she frowned, then twisting around to her mother, asked, "Where Father?"

The adults looked at each other, and Marina raised her shoulders helplessly, grinning. "Leave it for now . . ."

The stopover in Edinburgh was a pleasant interlude. Relieved that their child had recovered with no ill effects, and now more able to appreciate that they had made good their escape from England, both Marina and Alex were in fine spirits as he took them on a brief tour of the town. To be free of Stafford at last left Marina feeling light-hearted and almost giddy. She was bubbly, talkative, and effusive, much more like her old self. There was a rosy blush on her cheeks, a lightness to her step, and a shine in her dark eyes that made heads turn to stare at her in the street. "I am happier now," she thought, "than I have been since since Ayrshire."

They rode past the castle, the Palace of Holy-roodhouse and its beautiful park, St. Giles Cathedral, where the firebrand John Knox preached in the time of Mary Stuart and often stirred up the people against her and out to the ruins of Kirk o' Field where Lord Darnley, the Queen's second hus-

band, was murdered, some said by the man she married next, Bothwell. "The day she married Bothwell," said Alex, "was the day she sealed her fate at least in Scotland. In the people's eyes she had wed her husband's killer, and only weeks after he died." He sighed and shook his head. "She was ever a rash, headstrong lady."

"Do you think she was part of the plot to murder Darnley?"

It was a question Alex had often asked himself. "I think not, nor does my father, but we will never know for certain. My sire the earl seems to think that she turned to Bothwell in desperation when so many of her other nobles ranged against her. Say what you will about the fellow, but James Hepburn was strong and courageous, if overweeningly ambitious and acquisitive. Of the Marian supporters at the time, Bothwell was the strongest next to my father, of course," he added with a grin. "But my mother resented the time he spent away from her, so he was less at Holyrood than the Queen would have liked."

"So she came to depend on Bothwell?"

He nodded. "He cost her her crown and the love and respect of her people, a stiff price to pay for a few weeks of passion. Hardly had they married when both were driven out of the country."

Marina sighed, staring at the rubble that was now Kirk o' Field.

"And now both are dead . . ." She shivered, thinking of how close Alexander had come to following them.

There was romance and magic in the city of Edinburgh, and that day Marina fell under its spell. As they rode along the Canongate, the Lawn and Grassmarkets, through tortuous little cobbled

streets and wynds hemmed in on either side by ancient medieval buildings, the past in all its glory and violence came alive for her as Alexander explained historical events in detail, as told to him when a boy by his father. Though she was very nervous at the thought of meeting them, Marina looked forward to it too. But she was English and there was no one more Scottish than a Highlander. Alex was indeed brave, she thought dryly, to think of taking her into the clan stronghold itself.

For hours Clare was intrigued by the sights and sounds of the city, her bright hair flying this way and that as her head swiveled to catch everything that interested her the dancers and mimers with their impromptu (and not always very professional) performances at the Cross, hoping for a few coins tossed down by the passing public. The stalls at the market too caught her attention, the colorful satins and lace on display; the pretty jars and bottles containing ointments and essences; the more pungent shops selling fish, fowl, and flesh.

She was quite content to let her father hold her, and gave him a kiss and a hug when Alex bought her a poppet with wide, startled eyes and red hair much like her own, and kept her tummy filled with honeyed oat cakes and buttermilk, and as a special treat, a sticky twist of sugar taffy that managed to get stuck in her hair.

"Oh, Alex," said Marina, making a face as she carefully disentangled the copper curls from the sweet, and wiped the messy little face, "you'll spoil her. You reall mustn't give in to her every whim."

Clare frowned at her mother and pushed her hands away, catching the gist of the remark, and buried her head in Alexander's chest, quickly realizing that she

had a soft mark in her father.

But eventually the little girl tired of touring and they took her back to the inn where they were staying during their brief stop in Edinburgh. It was a quaint little place called the Hare and Hound, an establishment that Alex had once heard his father speak of with great favor. Plain as it was, he couldn't quite understand his father's praise, but it had the advantage of being tucked away on a side street and Alex was anxious to avoid the more pretentious places where he might be recognized. He had rented two rooms at the Hare and Hound, one for Marina and Clare, the other for himself, but he soon hoped to switch the arrangement around.

At the inn they separated to bathe and change for dinner. Since Clare was with them, Alex proposed they dine that evening downstairs.

Clare's flagging energy revived when she sat in a tub of warm water with her mother, then was dressed in a lovely new pink organdy gown, her freshly washed curls brushed out and tied with glistening satin ribbons, finery she had never known at Baxton Hall. "There!" said Marina, smiling as she held her up to the glass. "Now you look like a little princess."

Clare laughed and nodded, delighted at the dazzling picture she made, and while her mother too donned one of the gowns Alex had bought them that day, a soft peach muslin frock with a rounded neckline, mist-green satin ribbons at her waist and cuffs, the child whirled and danced around the room, crying in a singsong voice, "Clare love Alex! Clare love Alex this much," throwing her arms wide.

Seated at the dresser brushing her own hair into a rippling cape of

palest gold, Marina eyed her through the glass. "Clare would love anybody who spoiled her,

I trow. And darling, you must call him"she had been about to say Father, but that was the way the little girl addressed Edgar, and Marina wanted the child to forget Stafford as soon as possible"Papa," she decided with a nod. "You must call Alex Papa. Don't forget."

"Alex!" Clare called back stubbornly. "Alex, Alex, Alex!"

Marina frowned, carefully fixing the sides of her hair back with ivory combs. "Methinks you have the makings of a very naughty girl, mistress Clare. Children should be obedient to their mothers; they should never gainsay them."

"Huh?" Clare ran to the table and snatched up Marina's new bottle of scent, spilling half of it across the surface of the dresser, a mishap that earned her a light slap on the hand. Pouting, the child glowered at her mother. "Clare not love Mama no more."

When Alex knocked on the door to take them downstairs for their meal, Clare was the one to open it, but when she looked up at Sinclair her tiny mouth fell open in astonishment.

He had shaved off his beard.

Marina jumped up from her stool by the dresser, the breath catching in her throat. There he stood, tall, dark, handsome in his clean tan riding breeches, fresh white shirt, and a different kid-skin jerkin, his long, muscular legs encased to the knee in polished leather boots, his black hair newly washed and shiningthe old Alex miraculously restored, or almost. The patina of maturity sat well, she thought, on his strongly chiseled features. *Very well!* Suddenly Marina felt herself blushing, a silly self-conscious smile wobbling on and off her face.

"Sir . . ." she stammered, ". . . h-how, ah . . .

different you look."

He grinned, swept Clare into one arm and held out the other for Marina, saying, "I hope your appetite is as fierce as mine is tonight."

She gave him an uncertain look, not at all sure that he was thinking of food.

The dining room of the inn was quite busy when they entered. Heads turned to gaze at them from other tables, admiring the attractive couple and their beautiful little girl, but before they had finished their meal that same little girl was nodding sleepily over her plate.

Marina was startled when Alex said, "I'll take her up to bed."

She laughed. " 'Tis sweet of you to suggest it, but nay, I always put Clare to her bed. Mayhap when she gets more used to you . . ."

But Alex stood up and lifted Clare into his arms, and the child seemed quite prepared to go with him. She put her head on his shoulder and a thumb in her mouth and closed her eyes contentedly, and the sight of that contentment gave Marina a queer, hurtful pang. Ah, but once Clare was upstairs in the chamber

Marina was certain that her daughter would be bound to miss her and start to kick up a fuss.

She jumped to her feet. "I'll go with you."

" 'Tis not necessary," Alex assured her. He put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her firmly back down in her chair. "I'll attend to Clare. You stay here and finish your wine."

Marina bit her lip. Up to this moment she had felt almost ecstatically happy. They had made good their escape from England. Clare had survived her mishap. They were free and, God willing, would never see Edgar Stafford or Baxton Hall again. But these weren't the only things to account for the warm glow and delicious excitement that coursed through her, Marina knew that well enough. Much of it had to do with Alex. Tall, handsome, and above all young! his very nearness brought her tinglingly alive again, all her senses springing awake as from a long, deadly sleep. It pleased Marina too to notice the sidelong glances the other women in the room had directed to their table, for Sinclair was a man who would always stand out in any room. But *she* was the one who was with him! *She* had all his attention. Marina felt she was the luckiest woman in Edinburgh that night.

But still she couldn't shake that pang of resentment as she watched Alex walk away with her daughter, Clare's copper curls against her father's shining dark hair, the two of them quite relaxed with each other. Though Marina was glad about that, still . . . she felt curiously

shut out, and it hurt severely. Up to now she had been closely involved in every aspect of the little girl's life. She'd had to act the part of both mother and father to her child, and it had become a deeply ingrained habit. Besides, Marina was afraid that once Clare was up in her room and realized that her mother

wasn't with her, she would feel frightened and insecure.

Marina rose and hurried after them and caught up with them in the foyer. When Alex heard her behind them he turned with a frown.

"It'd best go with you," Marina told him. "She's not used to anyone else putting her to bed."

He regarded her gravely for a moment, sensing the nervousness and insecurity in her manner, her strong desire to keep Clare all to herself which was wrong, he felt.

"Marina, I would like a few minutes alone with my daughter. Go back to the table and wait for me."

Alex's voice brooked no argument, and having stated his intention, he left her and climbed the stairs, the child held firmly in his arms, leaving the mother standing in the hallway with a stricken expression on her face. Marina felt as if he had slapped her.

She was suddenly blazingly, unreasonably angry. A scarlet stain spread up from her neck into her face, and she felt like running after him and wrenching Clare out of his arms, and would have too except that it would have frightened the little girl to find herself the object of a tug-of-war between her parents.

There was nothing for it but to return to her table.

Once seated, Marina seized her wine glass and tossed the contents down, then refilled it from the bottle on their table, hoping it would still the violent agitation inside her. She was fuming, so angry she wanted to scream.

How dare Alexander come back into her life and try to take over her duties as a mother! How dare he order her around! What could he be thinking of to take her baby and shove her, the mother, away? Marina stared into her wine glass, blinking furiously to hold back the

tears, feeling terribly unwanted and bereft. Had Alex only said to her, "Do you mind if I tuck Clare in tonight?" it would have been different, she thought furiously, but of course that wasn't his way. Oh no, he was a man who always did as he pleased and wouldn't deign to ask anyone for permission. Now . . . now he was luring her baby away.

Marina picked up her glass with a trembling hand and swallowed half the contents. Well, she thought, she had much to thank Sinclair for and she was the first to admit it but that didn't give Alex the right to push her around; to dictate how she should conduct herself as a mother . . . or anything else, for that matter. She had no intention of exchanging one tyrant for another!

The wine had a calming effect on Marina and after a few minutes she felt a little more in control of herself, a little more reasonable. On reflection, she supposed that Alex had a right to spend some private time with his child, and though she'd had Clare all to herself up to now Marina realized that she would have to share her from then on. Very well, she thought, lifting her chin and taking a steadying breath, her eyes flickering to the door, very well then, she was prepared to accept that. What she *wasn't* prepared to accept was the arrogant way Sinclair had gone about exerting his rights.

He was gone what seemed to Marina an awfully long time. She began to fret that he might be having trouble with Clare, and no wonder! He was practically a stranger to the babe and he had the nerve to think he could take over so easily. Nay, Marina soothed herself, Clare would soon make her preference felt when she woke up to the fact that her mother wasn't coming to kiss her good night, and to play their little

game, to hold her in her arms and rock her to sleep. Good! she thought, smiling bitterly, almost laughing aloud when she visualized Sinclair having to cope with a shrieking, angry little girl who had a pair of lungs that could be heard miles away.

Marina hastily composed her resentful features when Alex strode back into the dining room.

"She's sleeping like an angel," he announced when he sat down opposite her.

"She . . . is?" Marina eyed him skeptically. "Didn't she, ah . . . ask where I was?"

Alex had just taken a sip of his wine. Now his eyes met hers over the

rim of his glass, and those eyes saw far more than Marina gave him credit for. He sensed her irritation very clearly. Alex had already noticed that Marina was totally devoted to their daughter, and that was fine up to a point, he thought. But he felt she was far too possessive, both for the good of Clare *and* herself, and it was something he intended to change. The way Alex saw it, there was more to a woman's life than mothering, something that Marina had lost sight of during her time at Baxton Hall. She seemed, he thought, a little confused about her identity, and no wonder when wed to a man who was no husband at all! Now she struck him as being confused, defensive, and lacking in confidence, as if uncertain of her own worth as a woman, something Alex was determined to remedy shortly. But there was a stubbornness in Marina, an obstinacy and stiff pride that he knew wouldn't be easy to deal with, especially as he wasn't noted for his patience.

"Clare is fine," Alex repeated, smiling. "I kissed her for both of us."

He certainly looked fine, thought Marina, glanc-

ing at him furtively when Alex called the serving woman over and ordered more wine. There he sat, one long leg crossed over the other, lounging back in his chair perfectly relaxed and sure of himself. But why shouldn't he be? Sinclair was on his own territory now. And he knew exactly what he was doing and where he was going, while she was still in a state of uncertainty, mainly about her place in his life.

Though he had changed in other ways, he was still the same confident, commanding Alexander, only more so, mused Marina. Aye, and even more attractive in his maturity. The candlelight glinted off his expensive polished boots, brought out the blue-black of his hair, the rich jade of his eyes, and emphasized the strong planes of his face and the curve of his high-bridged nose, giving him a faintly rakish but altogether arresting appearance.

The wine was brought to their table and Alex refilled their glasses.

"Well!" he said with a grin when the silence grew awkward between them. "Another inn and another day, but still the same people."

"I wouldn't say exactly the same." Marina was in a mood to be perverse. "How could we be when we are more than three years older and so much has happened to us in the interim?"

He grinned. "You at least have improved with time."

She colored as his fiery green eyes burned over her, touching on her hair, her face, and lingering on the twin arches of her white breasts peeping saucily above the neck of her moderately low-cut gown and rapidly turning the same peach hue of that gown under his bold appraisal.

Marina confessed, "I certainly never expected to be back in Scotland."

"Ah, woman, you have little faith," he teased. "There is much you have to learn about the Sinclairs, Marina. They keep their promises and take care of their own. Had you known our kind better you would have realized I'd turn up again to see how you were faring, and of course to determine if you might have something that belongs to me."

"You mean Clare?"

Alex nodded. "No Sinclair worth the name would ever allow any bairn of his to be brought up in England, especially by a knave like that husband of yours. Clare Sinclair." He turned the name over on his tongue, as if savoring it. "I misliked the sound of it at first," he admitted, "but now I think it has a bonny ring to it. 'Tis not a name easily forgotten."

Her eyes narrowed. "What if I'd refused to return to Scotland with you?"

Alex looked at her sharply. "You did, at first," he reminded her. A look of mischief glinted in his eyes as he added, "But I think you must be happy now that I managed to change your mind?"

Their clandestine and passionate moments under the broken bridge rushed back into Marina's mind and she burned with embarrassment remembering the shameless way she had succumbed to him but she wasn't about to admit how much *that* had influenced her decision to return with him to Scotland. The man was far too conceited and presumptuous as it was, flattering himself by thinking that his irresistible charms had convinced her she couldn't do without him.

"The thing that changed my mind," Marina made

quite clear, "was that Edgar intended to foster Clare out, and I couldn't bear to let that happen."

For a minute the laughter and teasing died in Sinclair's eyes, and

Marina felt a smug satisfaction, delighted to have brought him down a peg or two. She felt insecure and vulnerable enough as it was without Alex impressing on her how much she needed him, as if she didn't know that!

"If I'd refused to leave, would you have tried to take Clare anyway?" She had to know, to discover if it had only been the child that had prompted Alex to risk venturing back into England.

He shrugged impatiently. "You did come, so the question is a mite after the fact. Why waste time conjecturing about what might have happened? Better to concentrate on the present and future."

The future? That was her main worry. At the moment Marina had no idea where she stood. Was she in Scotland now only because of her daughter? She decided to feel him out.

"I suppose you think we can simply pick up where we left off three years ago?" Marina asked him, her heart racing, almost afraid to hear his answer.

"Nothing in this life is simple," Alex sighed, his manner falsely grave even though Marina suspected that he was laughing at her inwardly. "To pick up something that is more than three years old would be stale pickings indeed. Nay"he shook his head, his eyes filled with amusement"I much prefer the fresh and new. 'Tis almost always better. And the new brings more of a challenge."

Exasperation almost choked her and Marina burst out rashly, "I would know how you mean to introduce me at Augustaas your mistress?" Then she held her breath.

Alex's dark brows rose. He was openly grinning at her now.

"Well . . . they will know that you cannot be my wife since you are already married. And they are also aware that I have no need of a housekeeper, since I already have one. So"he lifted his shoulders"what does that leave?"

"Oh . . ." Blushing furiously, Marina dropped her eyes to the table, her heart thudding so loud she felt certain he must hear it, all sorts of erotic images rising in her mind to taunt her, her starved flesh quivering. But after a second it struck Marina that Alex hadn't actually said he *desired* her to be his mistress, but rather that his family would assume she was. That made a vast difference.

She gave a start when Sinclair leaned across the table and put his hand over hers. "Be at ease, Marina. My family must think what they will. Only you and I will know the truth."

Her deep brown eyes rose to his, to find him smiling mysteriously, his words and manner maddeningly enigmatic.

"Only we will know," he repeated, his eyes burning into hers.

All Marina knew at that moment was that she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't gather her wits together under that dark, penetrating stare, eyes that seemed to understand her only too well, perhaps even better than she knew herself.

Hastily she looked away. "I must go up and see to Clare. Nay!" she added quickly when Alex too rose, "'tis not necessary that you come with me. Stay here at your leisure."

He rose anyway and escorted her out of the room and up the stairs. But when Marina would have gone

into her daughter's room, Alex caught her playfully around the waist and whisked her to the chamber next door.

"The babe needs no seeing to," he said. "But there's a matter between us that requires urgent attention."

20

The moment his door was closed and locked behind them, Alex gave her no time for sober deliberation. Ignoring Marina's tight, angry face, he said, "I see no reason to make life more complicated than it need be," and seized her in his arms, his thirsty lips swooping down to capture hers. When she tried to wrench away, to twist her head to the side to evade those ravishing lips, Alex held her firmly against him with one arm and, plunging his fingers into her hair, forced her head back so that she could do naught but glare up into his face.

He chuckled low at the sight of her wrathful, indignant expression, the outrage glittering in her beautiful dark eyes. "Downstairs you were full of questions," he said, his emerald eyes taking in every detail of her upturned face. "Now I propose to answer them *properly* in a manner that should leave no lingering doubts in your mind."

The pins and combs burst from Marina's hair as he brought her face to within less than an inch of his, then very deliberately his searching tongue teased the full outline of her mouth, his touch so light, yet so sensual that Marina inhaled raggedly, gathering all her strength to resist what she knew was to come, but even then, acutely conscious of his hardness against her, aware that she had no will to do battle with him. Almost leisurely Alex plundered her mouth with that honeyed tongue, his fingers moving more gently now through her tumbled blonde hair, his body pressing insistently against hers in a way that told Marina how much he needed her.

Her head spun alarmingly even as her famished senses leapt to answer that call, a message as clear to Marina as if he had put it into words. But no, she thought wildly, tensing herself and determined not to respond. First Alex had to make his intentions clear as far as their future together was concerned. She ached for him to tell her that he loved her; to vow that when the time came and she was widowed, then he had every intention of marrying her. Marina was driven to wring that vow out of him; to bring at least a semblance of respectability to their relationship. Then and only then could she hold her head up when she met his family.

But in moments Marina learned something that her proud spirit found difficult to digest. She was in no position to dictate! No position to negotiate or coolly haggle over terms. Shutting his ears to her cries of outrage, Alex picked her up and carried her to his bed and fell upon it on top of her, smothering her protests with his lips and tongue, with the potency of his fully aroused body. He almost ripped the new gown away, exposing her blushing flesh to the burning intensity of

the implacable eyes that gazed upon her as another might savor a feast spread out for his delectationthe lush succulence of her milk-white breasts tipped with blooming cherries, the tight plane of her stomach, the dark and secretive pelt between legs held rigidly closed against him. His fiery eyes flashed upward to her face, the full, quivering lips, silken cloud of pale gold hair scattered about on the pillow, then to her eyes, glowing as with a raging fever, and there was nothing of denial in those eyes now.

"How sweet and beautiful you are, my Marina." His voice was so deep and low that she scarcely heard it, but the emotion in his voice, if not the words, struck away all uncertainty and confusion, all the doubts and misgivings shielding her soft, vulnerable heart. "My Marina," he had said, his voice so loving, so possessive, so caring. She closed her

eyes and expelled a long, relieved sigh, chiding herself for being so fainthearted.

Quite suddenly the candle he had left burning at his bedside sputtered out, nipped between Sinclair's impatient fingers. He rose then and Marina heard him undress, heard his harried breathing in the quiet room, and the darkness took on a throbbing imminence as the air will before a storm.

Then Alex was kneeling between her legs, spreading them wide, and Marina felt his fingers, like those of a blind man, tracing the shape of her features, the contours of her lips, her eyes, her ears, roving like teasing whispers through her hair and lightly down over her shoulders. She held her breath, her body trilling as each hand circled her breasts, thumbs now and then flicking nipples already ripe and clamoring for more serious consideration. She gave a start, her

lips parting, when she felt the tips of his fingers graze her stomach taut and hard with anticipation then sink lower to the hot, dark place between her thighs.

Board-tense, Marina felt him part her, felt a gliding finger penetrate to stroke and fondle that which had been long dead but in a flash came eagerly alive, rising like the parched head of a flower to the rain, silky, moist, beating like a pulsing heart. A great flooding heat washed over her. Instantly her flesh was drenched with dew. A mad, wanton hunger seized hold of her, driving everything else out of her mind, and voraciously Marina reached for him, thrilling when her sweating hand closed over rigid flesh.

Alex fell on her then, his lips and tongue devouring, tasting, probing, greedily sucking her breasts, ravishing her bruised, swollen lips, lapping at her ears, her throat, while his hands roved over every heated inch of her body. Everything changed then. From shrinking back from him, Marina now surged forward, unable to get close enough to quell the feverish desire shrieking inside her for release. Sobbing, she drove her fingers through his hair, her touch as ruthlessly demanding as his, clutching at the bulging muscles of his shoulders, his back, his thighs, moaning, "Oh God! Alex . . . my love . . ."

Slipping his hands under her buttocks, he lifted her onto his lap. With a delicious shock, Marina felt his burning rod plunge deep inside her, even as his mouth, hot and moist and relentless, took full command of

hers. But it was she, rather than he, who had lost all control and began to move with wild abandon, faster and faster as a jockey will drive a horse to a much sought after goal. Mouths joined, her breasts crushed against his chest, her arms tight about his neck, Marina strove for that final rapture, but Alex

had no intention of allowing her to set the pace. After a moment he swept her back against the pillows and loomed over her. "Dear love . . ." he groaned, and vigorously, powerfully, drove her over the pinnacle into mind-shattering ecstasy.

Violently Marina shuddered against him, rocked to the very core of her being. It seemed as if a great hard lump had disintegrated inside her, and with the strain, the denial, of the last three years gone, she suddenly burst into tears.

Alex understood and tenderly enfolded her in his arms, his hand stroking her hair, his lips pressing soothing kisses to her wet cheeks and drenched eyes, and finally once more finding her mouth, tremulous now under his.

After a minute he teased, "Well, was the new better than the old?"

"Aye . . ." Marina admitted shakily. "And for you?"

" 'Tis something I can quickly acquire a taste for."

She raised her wet face to him in the darkness. "To think we are back together again!"

"If I recall, you took some convincing. Cruel wench"he playfully shook her a little"you did not immediately leap back into my arms, as I might have expected. Nay, not you. It took that husband of yours to force the decision by threatening to send Clare away, then you *had* to take action. So I cannot flatter myself into thinking it had anything to do with me."

Marina was instantly ashamed. Warm and relaxed, wrapped in the security of his arms, she hastened to assure him, "Oh, Alex, it *did* have much to do with you! How can you think otherwise after . . . after what just happened between us?" She raised herself

up on her elbow and bent over him. "Do you really think I would give myself to someone if I didn't care for them?"

She felt him shrug. "I only repeat what you told me downstairs."

"But surely you don't believe it?" she queried anxiously.

He didn't, but he strung her along. "I don't know, Marina . . . as you said before, both of us have changed, I think you more than me, so I cannot presume to guess what is going through your mind. Nay . . ." he sighed and shook his head, ". . . I think you will have to try hard to convince me that you care." He reached for her hand and placed it on his thigh.

Marina realized then that he was teasing her, and snatched her hand away.

"Alexander Sinclair, you are a wicked, heathenish rascal!"

Laughing, he lifted her on top of him and kissed her passionately, and that was the last of their conversation for quite some time. But when dawn filled the chamber with a cool, white light, Alex again turned to her, asking, "Well, did I manage to answer all your questions?"

Marina lay against the damp, rumpled sheets feeling pleasantly boneless, her long-starved body completely satiated at last. It was his probing question that suddenly cut through her languor, reminding her that there was one important question that still remained unanswered in her mind, and as she thought about it and what it meant to her her tension came rushing back.

For a second Marina hesitated, afraid to spoil the newfound joy they shared once more. But even so, she

knew she would never have a moment's rest until she knew the truth, so she whispered, "Nay, not quite all."

Alex lifted her up to sit beside him against the pillows. Her heart fluttered at how grave he looked, all the mischief and teasing gone now. Fascinated, her heart thudding, Marina watched him remove from his little finger a heavy gold ring with a blood-red ruby at its center; then he turned to her, the expression in his eyes unfathomable.

"I may not have answered all *your* questions, Marina," he said. "But you have answered mine. You are my only love, as you ever have been, and this ring is the token of it."

Tears of joy spattered down Marina's cheeks as she watched him slip it

on the middle finger of her left hand, then she threw herself into his arms.

"Alex," she wept, "you have made me the happiest girl in Scotland."

"No more doubts from now on," he said, and kissed her deeply.

In single file they rode along narrow trails beaten hard by the clansmen through the centuries, climbing steadily higher into the mountains like pilgrims on a journey to nature's shrine. So total was the silence that it seemed like sacrilege to break it, and for a long time they traveled on without speaking, the only sound the sighing of the wind through the hills, rustling in the heather, and now and then the bell-like ring of a horse's hoof striking granite, echoing like a chime through the hush of the glens.

The afternoon was sullen, the landscape a study in black, gray, and white, silver radiance bursting in the sky where the sun tried to break through the billowing clouds. Far below Marina saw the still, mirrorlike

polish of a loch, a sandy beach without a footprint, and the startled gleam of a stag's eyes watching them from a wooded gully, immobile while they rode on by. In the strange metallic light quartzite scree glittered like diamonds in the dull gray rocks. Gorse flowers hung like droplets of gold in the tangle of dark bushes, and from the black precipice high above sprayed a torrent of crystalline water, the fall vanishing into a gloomy chasm hundreds of feet below.

All about towered the mountains, marching in stately grandeur to the far horizon. Wild moorland of heather and bracken swept across high plateaus. A castle sat upon a distant cliff in lonely isolation, the only sign of man she saw in a region of dramatic beauty, desolate and untamable.

The clouds tossed and rolled in the eerie storm light, frosted with silver. Tiny pink and blue alpine flowers shivered with apprehension in the rising wind, their roots well buried in the narrow cleft between boulders, but their delicate heads vulnerable, as were all fragile things in a land made for giants.

Following Alex's horse, her eyes drawn from the scenery now and then to glance at his broad back, as if for reassurance, Marina was awestruck by the beauty of her surroundings, but also slightly nervous as they picked their way along tracks where one false move would

mean a dizzy plunge into dark valleys far below. Her uneasiness increased when now and then she saw flashes of lightning and growling thunder boomed through the mountains. At such times she wanted to call to the man up ahead, to suggest they take shelter under a cliff or wait out the storm in one of the many caverns she noticed cut deep into the hillsides.

But she bit her lip and kept quiet, certain that

Highland women would not be so fainthearted, nor must she be now that she was pledged to one of the clansmen. She had the feeling that Alex would have scant patience with a jittery, high-strung woman. Fearless himself, Marina sensed that she would go down in his estimation if she showed signs of timidity.

They stopped for the night in a tiny stone cot used by herders and travelers. It was bare of furniture except for a small battered table and two stools, the only concession to comfort the massive, crude stone fireplace with a rough chimney jutting up through a hole in the smoke-darkened ceiling, stacks of peat piled up at one side. If they used some of the fuel, Sinclair explained, they were honor-bound to replace it before they journeyed on, so that the next weary traveler who stopped there might enjoy the same welcoming warmth that they would.

Soon Alex had a huge fire blazing in the hearth. It filled the dark little shelter with a bright orange glow, chasing away the cold and dampness that had Clare whimpering and Marina shivering in her boots. While she attended to the little girl, Alex, with a certain flair and obvious experience, whipped up a surprisingly tasty supper from provisions carried in their saddle bags, turning dried red meat, peas and lentils and oatmeal into a kind of stew that, while plain, was pounced on by the hungry travelers.

Their blankets were spread out before the fire. By then the heat in the small building almost made covers unnecessary, though Marina found it wonderfully satisfying to curl up against her love, the covers tucked around her back, and listen to the full force of the storm breaking ferociously over the mountains. Alex lay in the middle, cuddling Marina with one arm and Clare with the other, and for a while they lay

listening to the elements do their worst, the wind roaring through the glens sweeping lashing rain before it, bursts of lightning eerily

glimpsed through the small windows, then crashing thunder so loud that Marina felt certain the world itself was being broken up and destroyed.

"I love storms," Sinclair suddenly announced. " 'Tis nature's way of reminding us that she still has the upper hand; that we should not get too cocky lest she decide to test our mettle."

"Then she must test you frequently, my lord," Marina replied dryly, but hugging him to take the sting out of her words.

"Och aye," Alex nodded, grinning, "that she has. But the emblem of the clan Sinclair is an armed cockerel, and you know how fierce and intrepid they can be, ever ready for a challenge. The elements have never bested me yet, though I would not wish to be an inexperienced traveler caught unprepared in these mountains, especially in winter. This"with a nod to the window"is only a hint of what she can do."

Marina cuddled closer, pressing herself against the warm, muscular frame lying next to her, the babe sound asleep on the other side. Storm or not, she felt deliciously secure with Alex, suddenly certain that he could protect them from just about anything. Was this how Highland women of old felt, she mused, snug and warm in their rude little homes with the love and protection of their men and children all that was necessary to them in life? Marina felt she was one with these women at that moment as she lay warm and happy in her man's strong arms. If this was all she could expect in life, she knew with certainty, it would be enough.

"Alex."

When he turned his face to her she kissed him, and all the love, tenderness, and pride she felt in him was in that kiss.

"Are you happy, my Marina?" His voice was a soft caress.

"Wondrous happy."

"I too," he confessed.

She was drifting off to sleep with her head on his chest when Alex said, "Tomorrow we reach Castle Augusta."

An errant thought skittered across Marina's mind, one that temporarily drove sleep away. "Please, God, let nothing happen to spoil our joy in

each other."

What had made her think that? Marina remembered Alex assuring her that his parents, of all people, would understand. Yet still the uneasiness persisted, and for a moment Marina wished they could stay where they were, just the three of them with no outside influence to intrude on their happiness, the only true happiness she had ever known. But she tried to take herself in hand, to still the niggling little voice now worrying away at the back of her mind, reminding herself that Alex was not the heir to the clan, which would make a difference. Less would be expected of him, especially in regard to making a brilliant marriage. But most important of all, he loved her, and he would not allow anything to come between them.

Long before they reached mighty Castle Augusta on its granite cliff overlooking the village of Lochmore, fast by the banks of the mysterious Loch Ness, they began to encounter Sinclair clansmen in their bright red-and-black plaids, the lookouts and sentries guarding clan territory.

Alexander greeted them enthusiastically in Gaelic, and though they seemed relaxed and friendly with each other, Marina noticed that these men gave Alex much deference and respect; none tried to be overly familiar, rather, they maintained a certain distance and reserve, as servants will with a master.

The importance of Alexander's position in the hierarchy of the clan, regardless of the fact that he would never be their leader, was borne home to Marina. She noticed too how the others gazed at her askance, their eyes betraying surprise and curiosity. Alex's brief introduction told them little. "The Mistress Stafford's from England," was all he said, leaving them to make of it what they would.

Immediately some galloped on ahead to warn the chief of their approach while the rest fell in behind them, keeping to a discreet distance as they continued on their way to the castle. But Marina could hear them jabbering excitedly among themselves in Gaelic, and she felt certain they were talking about her, doubtless wondering what Lord Alexander could be thinking of to bring his foreign mistress and Clare made their status obvious right to the door of the clan stronghold. In England few among the highborn brazenly presented their lovers to their families, and Marina could not imagine things being any different in Scotland. She quailed as she visualized their shock, the insult they would feel to have her thrust rudely into their

midst whether they were prepared to receive her or not, and again she wondered at Alex's audacity.

She had taken great pains with her toilet that morning, in spite of the fact that she'd had to bathe in cold loch water. Now, dressed elegantly in her scarlet riding habit, a saucy little hat perched atop her shining blonde hair, Marina was fairly confident that

at least she *looked* like a lady, even if she had neither money, influence, nor title to her name. Aye, and she would conduct herself like one too! she made up her mind. She would not go among them with her tail between her legs or bow and scrape to win their favor. Either they would like her for herself or they would not like her at all. She was a Dudley, and Dudleys were people to be reckoned with in England. "Ah, but you are in Scotland now!" chuckled a disturbing little voice lurking inside her. "Dudleys are of no importance here."

Marina turned her head to find Alex watching her, a sympathetic expression on his face, as if he understood exactly what she was feeling. But she gave him a bright, confident smile as he rode along beside her, pretending far more courage than she felt, some instinct prompting her to take a tip from him and brazen it out.

"Proud I'll be to show off my women," he said, his eyes warm as they moved from Marina to the child sitting in front of her in the saddle. "I'll be the envy of all when they behold you, for there are none fairer in this land."

Marina realized that this was his way of conveying to her that he had no second thoughts about bringing her here, and it was the best boost to her spirits she could have had.

Then Alex raised his hand and pointed into the distance, and suddenly Marina spotted Augusta. It was huge, dark, forbidding against the storm-tossed sky, brooding down paternally on the small village of Lochmore below and the rugged territory surrounding it as it had done for over six hundred years, sheltering generations of Sinclairs within its stout, impregnable walls.

Would these same walls fall down, Marina mused, when an English *woman* accomplished what no Englishman had ever done breach the fortress?

The outrider delivered his message to the chief and departed, and the

chief in turn returned to the Great Hall to break the news to his wife. The countess collapsed into a chair and put a hand to her head, moaning, "And a child! God's love, 'tis like history repeating itself." Then fiercely, "Oh, how could he? He of all people should have known better." She pressed a clenched fist to her mouth, fighting back tears, her lovely face so pale that the earl was alarmed.

He went to a cupboard, took a key out of his pocket and unlocked it, and lifted out a cut-crystal flask of brandy and poured generous amounts into two glasses. Handing one to his wife, he said briskly, "Now listen to me, Alyssa, what's done is done and no amount of weeping and wailing will change it. Drink that," he urged with a nod to the glass, " 'twill steady you."

She did, then wondered aloud, her voice breaking, "Blake, you don't think . . . you don't think this is his way of paying us back?"

The earl's dark brows flew up and he scoffed, "Nay, what nonsense! The things you get into your head! The trouble with you, Alyssa, is that you harbor guilt far more than is necessary, blowing it up out of all proportion"

Her head snapped up as she interrupted heatedly, "Aye, I *do* feel guilty that our oldest son can never be chief one day, as is his due. And I feel guilty each time he and David squabble"

"Brothers usually do," he said with a grin.

"We have put them in this situation, my lord, and

because of it Alex has always had a driving need to prove his worth. And now now he has gone and embroiled himself in much the same situation with this English woman, and their child will suffer for it. By the Blessed Virgin, I cannot believe it."

They were in the Great Hall of Castle Augusta, the earl standing in front of a massive, ornate fireplace, his countess seated in a chair nearby, and for a moment both fell silent as they contemplated this startling turn of events. The huge room they were waiting in was very grand, the carved oak furniture glowing with a rich patina, mellow tapestries and a pastel-hued Turkey carpet on the walls, and fresh, sweet-scented rushes on the floor garnered from the banks of the Ness, with carnations and rose petals scattered among them. Vases of flowers lent color to dark niches, and there was a stunning portrait of Lady Alyssa hanging in pride of place above the mantel. Two shaggy

wolfhounds lay near the earl's feet, both watching his every move while pretending to sleep.

Alyssa stared into the fire that had been lit to ward off the dampness brought about by the storm. She had known about the English girl, of course, but had supposed that the affair had been finished long ago. Now she knew that this girl had been the reason Alex had cut short his recuperation, abruptly vanishing one morning and leaving the terse message behind, "Gone to attend to business in the South." They had been under the impression that he had gone to Ayrshire to see into some property left to him by his grandfather, never dreaming that he would have dared venture into England after his recent travails there. The very fact that he had done so served to prove to her how important this woman must be to him but the lady was already married! And the child, so Alyssa had

been led to believe, was her husband's.

She gave a start when Blake leaned down and took the glass out of her hand and set it on the mantel, then drew her up into his arms. For a moment he regarded her upturned face tenderly, thinking that she was still the most ravishing woman he had ever known, aye, even with silver threads in her flaming red hair and the faintest of lines about her eyes. She had, the earl felt proudly, the type of beauty that was nigh indestructable, that mellowed well with the passage of the years.

"If you could return to your youth, Alyssa, would you change things?" he asked her, low.

"You mean with us?"

He nodded.

A look of horror filled her clear green eyes. "Nay, darling, never! 'Tis only that I wish . . . wish we had been wed at the time we had Alex, that is all." She hugged him tight and laid her head against his chest, murmuring, "'Tis the only thing I would change about our union, which otherwise has brought me nothing but bliss."

Remembering a recent conversation with King James in which he had brought certain matters to the King's attention, Blake raised her face to his and said, "Once, long ago, I made you a promise, Alyssa. If you remember, I told you that our son would not suffer from being born out of wedlock; that I'd do my utmost to make certain of that. Well . . ." he smiled into her curious face, realizing that nothing was

decided yet in Edinburgh and that he must take care not to build her hopes up lest they be dashed, ". . . I doubt that any could say Alexander has suffered in any way through us. He lacks nothing. And, my love, he is a young man yet with his whole future before him. Depending on

how he conducts himself, great good fortune could lie in store for him. But for now," he hurried on when he saw that she was about to question him, "try not to worry. Remember how *we* were in our youth?"

In their youth! Alyssa looked up at him with the old flirtatious glint in her eyes. Even yet, she thought, Blake had the power to excite her not so surprising, she supposed, since he was still a very attractive man who looked ten years younger than his fifty-three years. She chuckled softly, "Think how we are *now*!"

"Shameless hussy!" The earl pulled her very close for a moment. "Would you have our children arrive and see us behaving thus? Faith, Alyssa, but parents are supposed to be grave and dignified and . . . sexless."

They kissed again, and she suddenly decided, "We will welcome this lady of Alexander's into our home and not make a stranger of her. I would not want her to go through what *I* had to when you first introduced me to the Sinclairs. To venture among them took every ounce of courage I possessed."

So when the young couple rode into the courtyard they found the earl and countess waiting for them at the door, and a more handsome pair Marina had never seen. She was a little taken aback to see that they were holding hands, and turned to Alex quickly, whispering under her breath, "Are these your parents?"

He nodded, grinning, well used to witnessing demonstrations of affection between them. He could have told Marina too that his father, as far as he knew, had never taken a mistress in all the years of their marriage, which was unusual for a man in his position.

The earl himself came forward to help Marina down off her horse, and the instant she raised her face

to him, Blake realized why his son who was so much like himself had risked his life to bring her home to Scotland.

Setting her down, the Earl of Belrose made Marina a courtly bow.

"Welcome to Castle Augusta," he told her.

21

"And this is our daughter," Alexander said after introducing Marina to his parents. Proudly he held Clare up for their inspection.

The earl and countess stared at the child, then at each other, and suddenly realized that they were grandparents, for there was no doubt at all that the child was Alexander's babe. She was a tiny miniature of the countess, even to her flaming red hair, more like her than any of her own daughters.

For a second the new grandparents were too moved to speak. Blake's hand tightened on Alyssa's when he noticed the glint of tears in her eyes then both reached for the little girl at once, but it was Alyssa who carried her granddaughter through the portal into the Great Hall of Augusta. Watching them, suddenly so relieved and happy that she felt she would explode, Marina felt instinctively that there was some-

thing significant in that, though she couldn't have said why.

She and Alex were given separate room in the castle, though with a connecting door. As she bathed and dressed for dinner that first evening, Marina was glad to have a few minutes to herself to absorb the exciting events of the day. Alex was with his father in the library, and Clare too had been taken off her hands by her grandmother. Now, seated at the dressing table in her mist-blue satin gown, carefully dressing her hair and anxious to look her very best that evening, Marina reflected that the meeting with Alexander's parents had gone vastly better than she had expected. She still found it hard to believe just how well, dreading the meeting as she had. They had been warm and friendly and so easy to talk to! Neither by word nor deed had they displayed any animosity toward her, or even embarrassment at her awkward position in their son's life. Clare had had a lot to do with that, Marina was certain. Their joy in being grandparents had immediately swept away any reservations they might have had, and by the time the three younger children returned from visiting their Uncle Jason and his wife, the ice had been broken and all four of them were quite at ease with each other.

Muir and young Ralph, eighteen and fifteen respectively, had recently

returned from France for their summer holiday, and they were obviously startled, as was their eleven-year-old sister Alicia, to find an English woman and a small child in their home. But taking their cue from their parents, they too had been friendly, especially Alicia who cried in delight when she beheld Clare. "Welladay, now I am an aunt! Oh, wait till our Kirstin sees the babe." She glanced at Marina shyly, explaining, "My older sister has been

wed these past two years and dearly wants a baby, but"she sighed"as yet none has appeared. So you would do well, mistress, to keep a tight hold on wee Clare lest she be stolen from you," she finished with a grin.

All the Sinclairs were dark, Marina noticed, and well above average in height, even Alicia, a lass with a puckish grin and long black hair reaching to her thighs.

"You will meet Kirstin soon," Lady Alyssa assured Marina. "She lives not far away. Doubtless, once she learns of your arrival, she and her husband will waste no time in riding over to meet you. David too should be back from Edinburgh this eve, mayhap in time for supper." In one of her warm, impulsive gestures the countess leaned forward and squeezed her hand, adding, "We are a very close family. My lord and I have never had a remote, formal relationship with our children, such as you might find in other households. We are a candid, exuberant lot, Marina," she chuckled, "but you must not let the Sinclairs overwhelm you. For myself, I had to learn to assert myself when I first came among them. 'Tis always wise to start the way you mean to finish up."

Marina sensed that Lady Alyssa was trying to tell her something.

She liked and was impressed by the chief and his countess, and dared to hope that they would grow to like her in return. She had noticed them both glancing at Alex's ring on her finger, so they must guess, she reasoned, that they were pledged to each other and would marry when she was free to do so.

Catching sight of her glowing face in the mirror, Marina felt that her happiness was almost complete, and certainly would be once Alex made her his wife. She decided that when everything settled down she

must write to Gwen Porter and let her know how well everything had gone, but when Edgar came into her mind, Marina quickly thrust all

thoughts of him aside. Marina hoped fervently that she would never have to set eyes on the man again.

When a thorough search of the countryside all the way to the Scottish border failed to uncover Marina or the child, Edgar Stafford rode to Brokenbridge Farm and barged furiously into the Porters' house, charging, "The sleeping tincture was in the jam! Only you!" he jabbed a finger at Gwen as the couple sat at the supper table with their small son "could have acquired such a substance. So, mistress, I can only conclude that you aided and abetted my wife in her plan to leave me. Where have they gone?" he thundered, hanging over the table and glaring into her face. "Tell me now or, bigod, you'll regret it."

Bert Porter sprang to his feet, overturning his chair.

"How now, Stafford, how now?" he growled, angry that his neighbor should force his way into their home and disturb them at supper. Bert knew by now that Marina had vanished with the child, but he had no idea that Gwen had helped them leave, simply because she had felt it best for his peace of mind not to tell him. Bert was a simple, straightforward fellow who had old-fashioned views when it came to marriage, and though he realized that Marina was far from happy with Stafford, so were countless wives who stoically resigned themselves to accepting their fate. He would never have considered it grounds for leaving her spouse.

"I like not you coming here in this manner," Porter made clear. "And to insult my wife"

"Ask her for yourself," Edgar interrupted. "Who but a midwife or doctor could have procured that

sleeping draught?"

Bert turned to his wife, who sat amazingly calm and self-composed under Stafford's tirade. "Well, m'dear, what do you have to say about this?"

She shrugged. "'Tis true I have poppy juice, but so do many who are neither midwives or doctors. I can assure you" she raised her brown eyes and looked directly at Stafford "that it is not so hard to come by. Look at Dacre's son, Nevil. Because of the juice, he lives his life in dreams. Aye, and many another too. Nay," she shook her head, "'tis not hard to get for one intent on finding it, and hardly evidence to accuse me."

"There!" said her husband decisively. "Now you have your answer. Now leave us in peace to finish our meal before I forget you are a friend and neighbor."

For a second the men eyed each other challengingly and there was an instant when Gwen was certain that Stafford would make a fight of it, but instead he suddenly wheeled away from the table and strode out of the house. To Tar, waiting outside, he grumbled, "There's no help to be got there, though I still say that Gwen Porter had a hand in it, and had they not long been allies of the Staffords I would not have let it rest until she spoke the truth." Edgar was no fool. He had already alienated the Percys, formerly another good neighbor, and if he were to do the same with the Porters he realized that he would stand alone in time of trouble, which could prove disastrous. Both these families were large, with hordes of kin to call upon for support. It had been this thought that had prevented Edgar from reaching across the Porters' table and seizing Gwen by the neck, choking the truth out of her if necessary.

Tar touched fingers gingerly to the large lump on the back of his head.
" 'Twas not a woman who near

bashed in my skull," he pointed out. "Nay, there was muscle behind that blow. Methinks her accomplice was male."

Stafford mulled that over as they rode back to Baxton Hall, then set about questioning his squire closely, demanding that he tell him of any man whom Marina had showed an undue interest in.

" 'Twas none of ours," Tar assured him. "They wouldn't have dared. Besides, they are all still at the Hall now." He threw a sidelong look at his master, reminding him, "Nor could it have been an outsider. She was too closely watched."

"Well, it was *somebody*!" Edgar glared at him, and as he recalled the evening that Marina had come home late from the fair and how pale and upset she had seemed, almost as if she had met a ghost on her way home a dark suspicion entered his mind, one that swelled ballonlike until it burst with the force of an explosion inside his skull. "Sinclair!" he cried, reining in his horse and bringing it to a dead stop. " 'Twas that bastard Sinclair! Aye, did she not run away with him before?"

"But but that was long ago."

"Not so long," he contradicted grimly, rage boiling inside him afresh at the pair daring to thwart him once more. At the thought of it he was nearly beside himself with fury, and his squire eyed him in alarm as his face turned a deep, mottled purple. Now, too late, Edgar saw his mistake in allowing Marina to go to the fair. Taking advantage of the crowds, Sinclair must have slipped over the border to meet her, and this was the result.

"We are going to Scotland," Stafford announced.

"What?" Tar's eyes widened in disbelief.

Edgar nodded firmly. "We will leave at dawn tomorrow morning."

His squire stared at him open-mouthed, sheer horror on his face. Go to Scotland! Face the nobleman surrounded by his clan, all fierce fighters if the tales he had heard of the clans were true. Further, there was an excellent chance that they would never reach the Scottish Highlands alive, nor even get safely over the border. Finally he stammered, "Nay . . . nay, master . . . that we dare not do"

Stafford struck him across the face with his whip.

"I give the orders here!" he shouted. "You need but obey. Do you think for a moment that I mean to accept this and do nothing? You fool, you should know by now that I *never* would. Sinclair took her to Ayrshire, did he not? Well then, he has either taken her there again or to his castle that the Cairnmoors spoke about in the mountains. I will find them!" he thundered, his face purple and his eyes glittering. "And 'tis your duty to accompany me."

They rode on in silence, Tar with a livid welt crossing his face from his forehead to his chin. He had worked for Stafford for years, as no other had done, and considered himself to be a loyal servant of the old type who were fast disappearing from the scene. But . . . he was not so young as he had once been and not quite so able in battle, and if they managed to cross the Scottish border he was certain that they would have to fight every step of the way if they ventured into the Highlands, and once there, doubtless, come to a violent end at the hands of barbarians. And all for a wench who had demonstrated that she would *never* stay with Stafford, regardless of how often they brought her back. His master was mad!

When Edgar arose to start the journey the next morning his long-time servant had vanished.

A Sinclair outrider led the way through the mountains, the two young noblemen and the rest of their followers coming behind. They had left Edinburgh that morning and hoped to reach Castle Augusta before dark, but had been hampered by the weather. All were bundled up in ankle-length hooded cloaks to protect them from the howling wind that drove sheets of rain before it, making the narrow, dangerous trails even more hazardous than they normally were. They rode forward over the necks of their mounts, heads low but eyes raised to scan the wild territory surrounding them, the lair of outlaws and brigands.

When the trail broadened, Jay Sinclair fell in beside his cousin David, the future chief of their clan. Rain dripped off Jay's long nose and streamed down his weather-beaten face, with a scar running from the left side of his mouth to his chin. He was not one of the handsome Sinclairs, certainly not a comely man like David, but he had a certain rugged appeal for all that.

"What think you of all the pother to do with the King fetching his bride over from Denmark?" he said. "To hear him tell it, there have never been storms at sea such as he encountered. His Majesty is no' over-brave, I fear." There was a hint of contempt in his voice.

David laughed, nodding. "'Tis amazing he risked going over there to fetch her at all. God's soul, to think that he actually went through with the marriage! 'Tis heartrending to see how Lindsay and all his other favorites are pouting and ringing their hands now that their lord and master has proved a turncoat," he mocked. "Bothwell swears he's actually quite smitten with the Queen."

"Fy, who would not be?" Jay thought of the beautiful, golden-haired Anne of Denmark, a blushing

young virgin only recently turned fifteen, and smacked his lips. "I thought of offering my services to teach him how to work with her," he chuckled, his dark eyes twinkling. He suddenly roared with laughter, "Bigod, I would have given a pouch of gold to see them that first night in the royal bedchamber!"

David laughed too, then said, "And now all this talk about witchcraft."

"It comes from sticking his nose too closely in books."

David glanced at him, sobering, "There *are* witches in Scotland,

cousin, as you well know."

Jay opened his mouth, then closed it again. He had been about to say, "And methinks your friend Bothwell might be one of that ilk," but thought better of it. At the moment Davey and Francis Stewart, the fifth Earl of Bothwell, were very thick, and Bothwell was closely related to the King through his father, Lord John Stewart, one of the illegitimate children of James V of Scotland, the present King's grandfather. Stewart's mother was Jean Hepburn, the sister of the same Bothwell who had briefly been married to Queen Mary, the King's mother, so he had a close connection to the crown. But King James loathed the man, though at first he had been generous to him and because of their kinship and Bothwell's undeniable intelligence and bravery had made him Lord Admiral of Scotland. But it hadn't been long before Stewart's overweening pride and ambition, his arrogance and outspokenness, had turned his sovereign against him. Though they maintained a facade of affability for appearance's sake, the inner circle at court knew how it was with them.

Jay was the same age as Bothwell, twenty-seven, and his cousin David only twenty-one, therefore through lack of experience more easily impressed. Jay had

been wilder than most in his youth, as the scars on his body attested to, but during the last few years he had calmed down and, he liked to think, matured. He could well understand David's finding the clever, boisterous, and powerful Bothwell an exciting contact in Edinburgh, and Bothwell, for his own reasons, nurtured the friendship with the future chief. But Jay sometimes wondered if it was wise. There was an unpredictability, even an instability, in Francis Stewart that Jay sensed even if David didn't, and it worried him.

The subject of witchcraft had been raised because of the violent weather Anne of Denmark had encountered during her sea journey to Scotland to join the King. So bad had it been that Admiral Munk, in charge of the fleet conducting her over, had had to take refuge in a Norwegian fjord, there to wait out the worst of the storms. This after the young Queen by proxy had almost lost her life when cannon had slipped from their moorings in the upheaval. That had been when King James, herolike, had decided to sail to Norway and bring his girl-queen back in person, but on the trip home they had again been bombarded by ferocious storms. Thereupon the good Admiral Munk declared that witchcraft must be the cause of it, that "someone" strongly desired to see the King and Queen dead at the bottom of the

sea.

In a way, Jay had been surprised that a man as cultured and intellectual as James Stewart could believe in witchcraft, or at least that people who dabbled in the black arts could actually have the power to bring about the results they wished. But of course the King had the type of searching mind that carefully weighed up and considered everything before he accepted or rejected an idea, and at the moment he seemed to be seriously considering that there might be

those in his kingdom who wanted him dead. And he had determined to find out who they were and burn them at the stake.

"I mislike Edinburgh," Jay suddenly confessed. "All the scheming and intrigue ever simmering there makes my head ache. They can have it. Give me the clean, uncluttered air of the Highlands any time."

When still a few miles from Castle Augusta, they came upon the first Sinclair sentries, one of whom rode forward to tell David that his brother had arrived home. "And he has an English woman and a child with him," he added, speaking their native Gaelic.

David and Jay exchanged a look of pure astonishment.

"Aan *English* woman!" Jay fairly spluttered. "In the name of all that's holy!"

David's face tightened. "Trust that brother of mine to catch us off guard."

22

Marina had enjoyed the evening immensely the orange glow of the fire filling the hall, the good food and wine, and Alex's eyes smiling at her in the candlelight, happy because he saw that *she* was happy. His sister Kirstin, a girl about Marina's own age, had joined them with her husband, Robert Douglas, whom Marina remembered coming to Baxton Hall with Alex following their abortive attempt to free Queen Mary. The small company had been disposed to be charming to their English guest, the piper playing discreetly in the background, and the storm outside the real world seemed very far away to Marina that night.

After dinner they were all seated around the fire, Kirstin strumming a

lute and her husband preparing to entertain them with a song, when the huge doors to Augusta burst open and two tall men in long, dripping cloaks entered, a chilly gust of night air entering with

them, making the candles flicker and the fire emit a sudden belch of smoke. Alex stood up and thrust out a hand in greeting as David and Jay Sinclair came hastily over to the warmth of the fire, rain spattering off them onto the rushes. "Cock's bones!" Alexander laughed at the state of them. "You two look as if you've had an encounter with Nessie." Nessie was the popular name given to the monster said to reside in the depths of Loch Ness.

" 'Tis an evil night," David nodded, shaking hands with his brother, at the same time throwing the hood of his cloak off his head, his thick, reddish-fair hair glinting in the light of the fire. Marina eyed him curiously. David Blake Sinclair was the only fair-haired member of the family, otherwise he was as tall and broad as the rest, she saw. Perhaps his features were a little more delicate, though he had the dark brown eyes of most of the family; Marina thought that he bore a marked resemblance to his mother. He was an exceedingly handsome man, but immediately she sensed that he was more aloof and reserved than the rest. "I heard from one of the sentries that you'd come back," he was saying to Alex. "Faith, but you come and go like a phantom."

In contrast to David's cool greeting, Jay Sinclair hurried forward and wrung Alexander's hand. "Happy I am to see you back, Cousin," he grinned. "Hopefully, this time to stay?"

Alex smiled. "That is my intention."

Then the newcomers turned inquisitively to Marina. She looked all blue and gold in the firelight, like a fine piece of porcelain, the flames etching her exquisite features and flickering in her large dark eyes. For a moment those eyes held David; bewitching they were, spellbinding. With an effort he wrenched his gaze away to her shimmering blonde hair, then to her full

breasts above the low neckline of her blue gown and for a second he couldn't conceal his surprise and admiration. "Well," he said, "I can see that Scotland doesn't have *all* the beautiful ladies in this island."

As was seemly considering his rank, Marina curtsied when she was presented to Alexander's brother. David took her hand and kissed it, bowing slightly. Jay seized her hand, gave it a smacking kiss, then

swept her a low bow. "Charmed I am to meet you, Mistress Stafford," he said enthusiastically, his eyes bright with appreciation that he made no effort to hide.

When the two men threw off their cloaks, the servants scurried to bring them hot food from the kitchen. They stepped up to the fire and held out their hands to the blaze, and the two wolfhounds, who had been basking there, gave them an aggrieved look and slunk away to throw themselves down in a dark corner where they wouldn't be disturbed. Turning his back to the fire, David looked at Alex. "So you went back to England? 'Twould be well," he went on when his brother nodded, "if the King never hears about this."

Alex shrugged. "James himself, so I hear, risked much to fetch *his* lady home from Denmark."

"That was different."

Lady Alyssa quickly changed the subject. "How goes it in Edinburgh, Davy? What of our new Queen? Does she seem to be adapting to our ways here?"

Conversation turned to the latest developments in the capital, Jay informing them that King James had launched a witch hunt, convinced that there were those in his realm who sought by Satanic means to bring about his own death and that of his Queen. The chief laughed. "What nonsense! Surely he is not serious?"

Jay nodded soberly. "He's set on an investigation,

enraged that traitors lurk about him, and enraged that they would dare to attempt such a thing."

"If any would 'twould be the English," David added without thinking. "The King's first step should be to rout Queen Elizabeth's spies from his court. Faith, but they slink about there like hyenas, the filthy scavengers"

"Brother," Alexander growled, "you have an uncivil tongue."

The heir flushed and stiffened at the rebuke, his eyes flashing with anger; then he realized his discourtesy. "My pardon, mistress." He bowed to Marina. "Tis just that I am not used to having foreigners in the castle. No offense intended."

Marina inclined her head. Her cheeks were scarlet.

There was a dreadful moment of tension as the two brothers glared coldly at each other and Lady Alyssa clenched her hands together in her lap, gazing fixedly at the fire. "Music, Kirstin," said the chief, throwing a hard look at his two oldest sons. Fortunately, the servants returned to the hall bearing steaming platters of food, and David and Jay repaired to the board for their supper.

But the evening was spoiled, though Kirstin strummed one gay tune after the other and Robby and even Jay, once he had finished his meal, obliged with a song or two. Afterwards the conversation limped off to a fresh start, and all, including David, made an attempt to be interesting and witty, but the tone of the evening was irretrievably ruined.

"Your brother doesn't like me," Marina cried the moment she and Alex were alone in her room, great disappointment in her voice. "And he hates the English."

"Nay, nay," Alex brushed it off, "you must not take it personally," but she saw that he was more than a

little annoyed. "He's only a lad yet and spoke without thinking." Suddenly he grinned. "And 'tis true that we've had few of your countrymen at Augusta."

Marina glanced at her bed where Clare was sleeping soundly.

"He showed no interest in seeing our daughter."

"We must introduce them in the morning."

Alex went to her then and slipped his arms around her waist, whispering in her ear, "Don't disturb the babe. Sleep with me this eve."

"But what will they think?"

He laughed at that, nuzzling her cheek, her throat, his hands sliding up the bodice of her gown to her breasts. "Why, think you, that we have been given chambers with connecting doors? They know we are pledged to each other and already lovers, and that I would take you even if we'd been given rooms at opposite ends of the castle. Besides" he turned her to face him, that lazy, sensuous expression in his eyes that Marina knew so well by now and thrilled to "when I

hunger to sleep with the woman I love I have no intention of asking others for permission."

Marina never tired of hearing Alex say that he loved her, but she felt compelled to say, "But to lie together before marriage in their house! And Alex" she wagged a chiding finger at him "connecting doors are common in ancient dwellings, and they were not put there for the convenience of clandestine lovers. Nay, they were to provide an escape route for the occupants in times of trouble, and well you know it! Do you actually think your parents would aid and abet our desire to lie together?"

He laughed, his arms tightening on her shoulders. "*They* lay together often enough before marriage, and I am the proof of it."

Something in his tone made Marina lift searching

eyes to his face.

"You . . . surely you don't blame them?"

"Nay, of course not," he replied quickly. "What good would it do to blame them? They were mad for each other, as we are, and since they were in no position to wed . . ." he finished with a shrug.

Marina studied him for a moment, wondering if he resented the fact that he was not the heir; if that was what caused the friction between him and David, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

"Our situation is much the same as theirs was," Alex went on persuasively. " 'Tis a fact that love does not always arrive at exactly the appropriate time, the convenient time, nor does it wait for official sanction." His eyes were warm as they moved over her face. "True enough, we are unable to wed but by God, we are perfectly able to love each other, and I for one have no intention of stifling my feelings until some priest of the church gives me *legal* permission to show them."

He spoke with such passionate determination that Marina had to smile. She could not help but admire Alexander's forcefulness, his utter disdain for convention and rules and regulations. Had he not been, she wouldn't be in Scotland today. These were also traits in him that Marina found exciting; Alex was a man with boundless confidence in himself; he was quite prepared to go his own way if necessary, as he had proved countless times. But it was different for a

woman. Very different. Where a man might be admired and applauded for his boldness and resolution, a woman would be condemned and ostracized; she would be thought unnatural.

"Easy for you to say, sir," she said.

He gave her a direct, appraising look, admitting, "I realize it won't be easy for you, Marina, but I feel you

have enough courage and fortitude to handle it."

He threw open the door to his own room and waved her inside, saying, "I think we have need of serious speech together so that we both, ah . . . know where we stand."

Feeling a touch of uneasiness, Marina walked ahead of him into the room and watched Alex close the door behind them. Then he pulled her down to sit on the edge of the bed beside him, taking her hand in his.

"We have already lost three years," he said. "Time we could have spent together. And if we wait for that husband of yours to expire, God knows how much longer it would be. Surely you can see that the idea of holding back until everything is just right would be ludicrous?"

Marina nodded. "Aye, but"

"We love each other"his hand rose to touch her cheek"and want to be together, and since we are already lovers, I want you to continue to share my bed; to live with me in a natural manner."

"As . . . as your mistress?"

Alex nodded soberly. "Until you can be my wife. There's no other way, Marina."

She recognized that much. There *was* no other way. But at least when the time came they would marry and make everything right. Marina could see that Alex was as anxious for that day to come as she was, and that knowledge made it easier for her to fill the role she must temporarily play. Otherwise had there been doubts about that in her mindshe would never have consented to continue to live with him as his mistress.

She put a hand on his knee and cautioned earnestly, "We will have to

be very discreet, to be careful not to offend"

"Marina, there will be nothing furtive, hidden, or

apologetic about the way we live," Alex made clear. "I would not demean our love that way."

"Butbut there's no need to flaunt it!" Marina protested, cringing inwardly as she visualized them being held up to public censure, contempt, and condemnation. She had been raised to be a lady; it was ingrained in her, and while Marina was well aware that many among the highborn had recourse to take lovers, since most of the marriages they were locked in were mere business arrangements, still, these illicit affairs were always conducted most discreetly and generally kept hidden in the background.

"We won't flaunt it," Alexander assured her, then added, "but neither will we live covertly, like creatures hiding in a burrow. That I could never stand!"

Her heart sank. "Youyou expect me to live *openly* with you as your mistress?"

Alex nodded, saying firmly, "It is not in my nature to skulk about."

Marina bit her lip and dropped her eyes to his tanned hand resting possessively on her knee, a pale circle on his little finger where his ring had once been, the one that now gleamed proudly on hers. She *wanted* to find in herself the courage to live openlybrazenly!as Alex suggested, and she certainly loathed the thought of acting in a way that would have demeaned their love for each other, tainting it, degrading it in a futile effort to conform to the edicts of society. But the scandal! The disgrace!

" 'Tis the only way we can stay together," Alex emphasized quietly. "I will not debase what I feel for you to please others, nor," he said, "should you."

Marina flicked a quick look at him from under her lids and saw that he was determined about this. She felt a hot spurt of anger, seeing no reason why they couldn't live quietly, circumspectly, for the time being

keeping their relationship out of the public eye. There was nothing

debasing about that that she could see! And it would make things much easier for her . . .

But Alexander had never been a man to take the easy way! Marina reminded herself. Now she was faced with a choice much the same as he had given her that day under the broken bridge in Northumberland, when he had told her he would wait for her decision for two days but no longer. This was one more of his impossible choices, but as with the other, he meant it. She would either live with him openly or not at all.

Suddenly and with a sense of defiance Marina realized that there was no choice involved. She loved Alexander, admired him for the very qualities that were causing her mixed feelings now, and certainly wanted to stay with him, aye, even if it meant thumbing her nose at society to do it.

She laughed shakily. "Well, my lord, since when have we ever gone the acceptable route? Faith, but it would seem strange to take that path now, after being used to battling our way through a thicket." Marina turned to him and their eyes met, hers as dark and fierce and rebellious as Alex had ever seen them. "I will spit in the eye of anyone who dares try to defile our love!" she declared, and meant it.

He caught her beautiful face between his hands, his look adoring. "My love," he said, "we were made for each other."

They lay naked together on the massive oak bed, arms entwined, bodies pressed close, for a few moments content just to hold each other. Secure in the warm cocoon of their love, safe behind the thick walls of Augusta and buttressed from the rest of the world by the mountains, they savored their feelings for each other while listening to the storm rampage in howling fury against the castle walls.

Alex turned his dark head, his eyes soft now, worshipful.

"There has never been another like you, my Marina," he swore. "Aye, nor ever will be. I cannot explain why, but from the first moment I met you . . . I knew, though you were a dented, battered wee creature" he smiled into her eyes "still, my dear one, I knew!"

"I hoped." Her voice shook with the force of her emotions. "But I could never be sure of you."

"And now you *are* sure?" His warm hand slowly caressed the side of

her body as it was turned toward him, and there was reverence in that caress that went far beyond physical passion, far beyond desire or the need for quick gratification.

"I'm sure," she whispered, oh, and the wonder and joy of being so!
"Did you think of me while you were in prison?"

"Aye, and nearly went mad with it." He considered a moment, then went on, "I think the worst part was not being able to contact you to let you know why I didn't come back. I realized you'd be wondering . . ."

"I thought you'd lost all interest," Marina confessed. Her expression grew sober as she remembered that awful time in her life, the waiting, waiting, then the growing despair and abject misery when she had to confront the fact that her love was never coming back; that all the promises Alex had made to her had been lies. But she had been wrong!

"Fainthearted wench!" he teased, and gave her a playful little slap on the hip that was more like a love pat. Alex hated to see the cloud of remembrance in the brightness of her eyes, and sought to bring the glow of happiness back. "Now I think you know Sinclair better than you did then?"

"M-much better." Her voice was not quite steady, for now Alex's hand lingered on her breast, his fingers

maddeningly toying with the nipple, and she felt his need swelling against her hip, his eyes suddenly on fire.

He kissed her mouth, her throat, her breasts, murmuring, "You will always be mine . . . always . . ." And to be hison whatever termsseemed to Marina at that moment all that she would ever desire. Within minutes, as Alex's hands and lips scorched her willing flesh, as he whispered how much he loved, desired, and yearned to cherish her, Marina's passion surged to meet his, wild as the storm that raged beyond the castle walls. Hungrily she pressed her lips to his smooth, tanned skin, her eager hands closing over bulging muscles, her fingers curling in the dark hair on his chest, then tracing the shape of him with her hands, then her lips.

Finally they united in a kind of frenzy, and there was a touch of rebelliousness in their union that night, both ready to do battle with anyone in defense of their right to love, neither doubting that they

would triumph in the end.

DEMONIC PACT

23

*Edinburgh,
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The violent storms of late summer gave way to a golden autumn in the Highlands as a mellowness settled over the land. The days were still now with soft blue skies and warm sunshine to ripen the fruit in the orchards of Augusta and the corn in the few arable fields in the rocky terrain. All the colors changed in a dramatic year-end burst of vibrant glory, the mountains from dark gray to a tawny bronze, the glens between the peaks like great fissures of fire as the trees blazed orange, yellow, rust, and red, the streams and lochs a sharp cerulean blue, and the moorland sporting a lush carpet of royal purple heather. The air itself had a spicy tang of summer flowers drying and crumbling in the brief, warm sun, of apples and herbs and freshly threshed corn. All hands on the estate, including the villagers of Lochmore, were busy with the harvest and setting stores aside for the long winter ahead. Great hunting parties set out in

search of game, much of it to be smoked and dried, and the cooks at the castle were busy making jams and preserves from the fruit and berries, and apple cider, sack, and wine. Beer and ale were brewed, nuts collected from the forests, and at the end of all the activity there was the annual Harvest Ball to look forward to once the work was done.

David Sinclair was astounded when he discovered that Alexander meant to appear at the ball with his mistress. For a day or two he simmered, then, deciding that he had as much right to his say as any, he confronted his parents late one afternoon in their private quarters at the castle. His father had spent the whole day hunting stag. Now, somewhat weary and fresh from a hot tub and still in his long dressing robe, Blake was relaxing with a glass of porter before supper while Lady Alyssa worked on a tapestry by the window. When David entered he found them chatting companionably, the very picture of domestic bliss. Somehow the sight of them looking so comfortable and happy together while *he* churned with such longstanding resentment because of them!infuriated the young nobleman.

After a curt greeting he came right to the point.

"Well, what say you to this?" he asked angrily. "Alex means to have her stand at his side at the Harvest Ball."

The earl nodded slowly, at the same time throwing a sidelong glance at his wife, who calmly continued with her sewing, the late afternoon sunlight streaming in the window making a golden halo of her head. Alyssa winced slightly as she pricked her finger, but she didn't raise her face from the work in her lap, nor did her serene expression change. To her son she seemed completely composed, but inwardly her emotions

were in sudden chaos.

"They have decided to live openly together," Blake explained.

"*They* have decided!" David's fair skin flushed with angry color. " 'Tis not for *them* to decide how they will conduct themselves here."

"Nor for you either," his father growled.

David stared at the earl, his dark eyes narrowing. "Then you mean to allow them to flaunt this relationship? Blessed Jesu, I cannot believe it! Have you thought how this will offend our guests, men of the Church among them? Shortly the Sinclairs will be the talk of the Highlands. Aye, and the gossip will quickly make its way to court. You know well enough how King James feels about such liaisons, especially when one of the party is married and wed to an Englishman!"

If he'd hoped to frighten his father he was disappointed. Blake chuckled and shrugged. "The King is no stranger to scandal in his own life and" he added pointedly "tends to be tolerant of the affairs of others."

But his son ignored the implied rebuke and forged on. "Aye, but provided the affair is handled discreetly and not brazenly paraded before the highest in the land, as Alex means to do with his paramour."

Afraid that the conversation was rapidly reaching the explosive point, Alyssa put down her sewing and gazed at her son tight-lipped. "Alex and Marina are pledged to each other, as you know, and will marry just as soon as they can."

"Pah!" David laughed scornfully. "Alex has been involved with other women in the past and never gone so far as to wed them, so why should this relationship be any different?"

"He was not in love with the others," his mother

replied evenly.

Defeated, and aware that he was getting nowhere, David glanced from one to the other and threw up his hands. Resentment made him incautious, and he sneered, "I should have known you would support him, as you ever have. Birds of like feather always flock together . . ."

The chief stood up. His face was dark with anger. Too late, David realized what he'd said and hastily stepped back. He was appalled at the way he had insulted them, and all the hot color drained from his face as the older man strode purposefully toward him, drew back his hand, and struck him a resounding blow across the cheek.

"Now, get out!" his father ordered grimly, even as Lady Alyssa jumped to her feet with a cry of dismay. "Forget not that I am still in charge here and 'tis not for you to question any decision I might make, but only to stand by it. When your head is cooler I will expect an apology," Blake made clear, his tone hard and cold, "but I tell you this now never speak to your mother or me like that again!" he roared. "Do you understand?"

David nodded stiffly; with a slight bow he turned and hurried from the room, his ears still ringing from the blow his father had given him and the chief's furious dark eyes imprinted on his brain. Never before had his father looked at him like that, his expression so chilling, so frighteningly close to hatred that the young nobleman shivered, deeply regretting the hurtful remark he had made one he knew had hit home. Had anyone else dared to insult them thus, anyone at all, David knew they would have had to answer for it over cold steel. Many had been disinherited for less.

He clattered down the stone staircase to the ground

floor with his thoughts in turmoil and his pride in tatters, alarm, regret, and stubborn indignation seething inside him, the chief's reminder that *he* was still in charge made abundantly clear and that David had no say in the matter they had been discussing or in any other matter either! Though the heir, he was accorded no more

consideration or respect than any of his brothers or sisters and a damn sight less than one of them, to his way of thinking! Things had been so much better when Alexander was away.

David went directly to the stables and in minutes was riding furiously for Edinburgh, where as the heir to Augusta he could expect to receive the respect he was due and a warm welcome from powerful men like Bothwell, Hamilton, Lennox, and others, men who were beginning to view *him* as their entrée into the largely intractable bastion of the Highlands. For over a year now David had been spending much of his time in the capital, carefully making what he saw as important connections for the future. When *he* became chief he had no intention of wasting his valuable time on his Highland estates; they could be left in the hands of a trusted administrator. Nay, his future lay not in the wild land beyond the mountains, of that the young nobleman was convinced, but in Edinburgh close to the King.

After a few leagues the heat of his anger cooled and he wondered idly how Alexander was doing at Cumbray, where he had gone to oversee their mother's properties. That was the role Alex had to look forward to, administrator-in-chief of the MacKellar clan, but under *the* chief, their mother. It was a very important position, one that would bring great power and prestige, aye, and great wealth too. Yet . . . for a man like his brother, born to lead, to command . . . how could Alex resign himself to never being allowed

to make the ultimate decisions?

It was a question David had often asked himself once both of them grew up and better understood the awkward situation. In a way, both of them were victims of their parents' conduct in the past. There had been a time when David, as a small boy, had adored and idolized his bold, headstrong older brother and followed him about like a shadow, trying to copy him in everything. Then they had been separated and sent to different establishments in France and England for their education, and once they parted, David's own personality had begun to assert itself. It was then that he was made to realize that one day *he* would be chief of his clan rather than his older brother, and his education was tailored with that end in mind. From the day he fully understood the true situation at Augusta, David's attitude toward Alexander subtly changed. No longer was he content to let Alex lead and direct him, and that, inevitably, brought them into conflict. But and David had to admit this in his more reflective moments the state of affairs at Augusta seemed to trouble *him* much more than it

did Alexander. From the start, Alex had been the type to go his own way and relish forging a place for himself in the world, nor did he appear to harbor any grudges against either David or their parents. It was David himself who struggled under a burden of guilt, feeling whether warranted or not that he had cheated his brother out of what should rightfully have been his. It made no difference to remind himself that he wasn't to blame. The guilt still rankled, and that guilt swelled and sharpened each time Alexander was in residence at the castle, rapidly reaching the point where David avoided having to see him.

In Edinburgh he always felt better. In the capital

there were no unresolved emotional conflicts staring him in the face and he could relax and be himself, the acknowledged heir to the clan Sinclair. And curiously, from a distance he always felt better about his parents and brother, and more able to love them as he should. Long before he reached the city, David was castigating himself for insulting his parents and fervently hoping that Alex would never hear about it, for if he did, David knew that it would lead to a violent confrontation between them, something he always dreaded would happen one day.

But Alex should not have brought his English mistress to Augusta!

Suddenly David found himself comparing Marina Stafford to his own betrothed, Lady Elenor Hamilton. He had been more than agreeable to be wed into the royal house of Hamilton, with its close connection to the Crown, and had required no urging from his parents in his selection of a future wife; he had, in fact, chosen Elenor himself, and counted himself lucky that she was as enthusiastic about the match as he was. Neither of them would go into it reluctantly, as so often happened with others of their class, and David was looking forward eagerly to their wedding next spring.

Up to now, he had never given much thought to Elenor's physical attributes. She was young and mildly bonny with her fairish hair and light blue eyes, and that had been enough for him, considering the more important benefits of marrying one of the Hamilton clan, a family whose head had a claim to the Crown next in line to the King himself. Strangely, David had never anticipated the delights of bedding Elenor. Now, all of a sudden, he thought that odd, the more so since that pleasure entered his mind in connection with his brother's dark-eyed mistress, a woman who

embodied all the elements of temptation, who evoked in a man forbidden desires.

Aye, David brooded as he cantered along the narrow trails, it was as well to remove himself from Augusta for a few days to give himself a chance to cool down and grow accustomed to the new situation. He would return in time for the Harvest Ball which Elenor too would attend and by then have grown used to the idea of Alex's return to the family after his long absence, and the addition of Marina and their child. He must find it in himself to accept things as they were and try to make the best of it. If not, the alternative could destroy their family and split up the clan, and that must never happen.

When he returned to Augusta the day before the ball, Alexander spoke in private with his parents. For an hour they discussed business as it pertained to Cumbray Castle, his mother's seat and stronghold of the MacKellar clan, a place where she spent several months of every year presiding over her own side of the family, an arrangement that hadn't been entirely successful. During her absences, certain MacKellars had taken advantage and abused the trust of their chief, rerouting revenue into their private coffers that by rights should have gone to the countess. Alex had discovered that her commissioner, Sam MacKellar, was himself corrupt, and proposed replacing him with a manager not connected to the family, therefore with no reason to play favorites or take sides in disputes as Sam had done. It was also decided that quite soon Alex and Marina should move to Cumbray and in this way keep a tight grasp of the reins and a sharper eye on his mother's interests. David, of course, could not fill that role as he was being groomed to assume command of Augusta in the future.

After their discussion, Alexander got up to leave. He was at the door when he turned to say, "If it would make things less awkward, Marina and I shall not attend the ball on the morrow. This is your home, and neither of us have any desire to cause you embarrassment."

Alex was startled when his father replied fiercely, "*You will* attend, both of you, precisely because it *is* my home and I shall invite whom I please and bedamn to those who disapprove!"

Though she had enthusiastically helped the countess supervise the decoration of the Great Hall with sheaves of golden corn, rye, and barley, and barrels of apples and nuts and other fruits, with scarecrows tucked into the darker recesses and a witch on a broomstick flying across a huge harvest moon, still Marina dreaded

the coming ball and thought of it as a test and an ordeal to be lived through with as much tact and dignity as possible. It never occurred to her that she would actually enjoy the occasion, even as it never occurred to her to refuse to go.

Alyssa squeezed her arm as they finished bedecking the hall, which now had a delicious aroma of sun-ripened apples. "I admire your courage, lass," she said, smiling at the younger woman, then suddenly revealed something of herself. "I too refused to be hid in the background at the time I was the earl's mistress."

"Then . . . then you think we are doing the right thing?" It was the first time Marina had spoken so openly about her relationship with Alex to his mother, but now that the delicate subject had been broached she was eager for the countess's opinion.

Alyssa didn't reply right away, but finally she said, "What is right for one might be wrong for another. It

all depends on the individuals involved." She studied the English girl appraisingly for a moment, then warned, "You will have to be thick-skinned, determined, and courageous, and above all, remember to hold yourself proud so that the insults will bounce off your chin rather than your bowed forehead." They both laughed, even while realizing that it was not a laughing matter. Marina was relieved to see that the countess could find some germ of humor in a situation that must be very difficult and painful for her too.

"I'm sorry that it must be like this," she said. "I would rather hide away than bring dishonor to your Hall, but . . . Alex and I love each other deeply and mean to make things right just as soon as that is possible."

"Wear the new melon gown," Alyssa suggested, a combative glint in her green eyes. "And you may borrow my silk orchids to dress your hair. If they must crucify you, let them remember you as a bird of paradise rather than a meek little wren. Then even if they cannot like you they will at least be forced to admire your spirit."

They walked up the stairs together to the private quarters on the second floor, but before they separated Marina said shyly, "Lady . . . I thank you with all my heart for being so understanding and for welcoming me here."

Alyssa touched a hand to Marina's cheek.

"Marina, I will not deceive you. I wish that things might have been different. But," she sighed, "they are as they are, and I *do* understand." Her eyes grew serious as she added very low, "Not only will you need to be strong today in defense of your love, but always."

At that moment Marina could only think of the ordeal ahead, feeling that if she could only get through

this first step into society without being torn to shreds, the rest would be bound to be easier.

The ball turned out to be far different than Marina had imagined, largely due to the fact that Alexander's public life far overshadowed his private one in the eyes of their guests that evening. He was hailed as a hero by the hundreds of people pouring into the castle. Few among them had seen Alex since his release from prison, and all crowded around him loud in their praise and admiration at his daring attempt to free Queen Mary. "And it won't be forgotten," vowed the young chief of the clan Gordon. "Nay, not by the nobles *or* the people of Scotland. Faith, lad" in an upsurge of emotion he threw his arms around Alexander and embraced him "but it's grand to have you back safe and sound."

Marina flushed with embarrassment when her lover introduced her to countless Frasers, Douglasses, Gordons, and others crowding the Great Hall as "the beautiful lady who provided refuge during our flight across England," a retelling of their own meeting that was highly exaggerated and embellished, but nevertheless put her in a good light, at least with their male guests, who were more impressed with feats of valor than their womenfolk. At the feast she was toasted almost as much as Alexander for providing hospitality to their native sons in their time of need. "Aye, and was so charmed by them that she could do naught but follow them back to Scotland," grinned George Gordon, winking at her from across the table, his eyes bright with admiration. "I'd say that England's loss is our gain."

Marina blushed and felt like a fraud as one blandishment followed another. Remembering the rude "hospitality" given the men at Baxton Hall, she

cringed inwardly and didn't dare glance in the direction of Robert Douglas and some of the others who had been there. But out of the corner of her eye she saw Robert raise his glass as enthusiastically as the rest, and not one of these gallant men gave the show away, for

which she was deeply grateful. It was then that Marina began to relax and enjoy herself, while ignoring the cold stares of some of the women who were less disposed to be gracious to the beautiful foreigner or fornicator, as some of them thought of her.

"Brazen strumpet!" whispered Lady Serena Grant to her daughter Magda, her eyes balefully regarding the woman who showed every sign of becoming the belle of the ball. Marina looked radiant in a gown of tissue-fine silk in a deep shade of melon, the succulent color heightening the effect of her sultry dark eyes and full coral-tinted lips, her shimmering blonde hair swept high in the latest fashion and dressed with miniature orchids the same luscious shade as her gown.

Magda Grant, who had once fostered the forlorn hope of marrying Alexander herself, whispered back, " 'Tis an affront to us all for them to thrust her among us like this, forcing us to accept her."

Her ladyship snorted. "I, for one, will not! Nor will any with the slightest sense of decency."

Sir Edward, well into his cups, cast a sour eye at his wife and daughter, both of whom were so pious that he claimed they had driven him to drink. "Hold your tongue," he ordered his lady. " 'Tis not for you to point the finger at anyone, considering the loins from which you have sprung."

She had "sprung" from the loins of Lady Magdalen MacKenar, a woman notorious as a witch in her day and the same woman who had done everything in her

power to destroy the Countess of Belrose and Kilgarin and rob her of her inheritance. Subsequently, there lingered deep enmity between Serena Grant and Lady Alyssa, all smothered over by a veneer of fake congeniality. Sir Edward and Blake Sinclair were cousins and the best of friends, and because of that, by the tacit consent of all involved, the old days had been allowed to sink into oblivion, at least on the surface.

The Grant women were not the only ones to whisper against Marina. The Dowager Countess of Mar too made no secret of her disapproval, nor did the wife of the Reverend Mungo Spark. Even David Sinclair's betrothed, a young lady with somewhat staring blue eyes, remarked, "I trow the magpies will be gossiping about this for weeks. To dare to bring her out into society!"

David didn't reply. He was remembering that Elenor's own mother had been the mistress of William Douglas for years, even though her husband was still alive and knew perfectly well what was going on but then he too had a lover tucked away beyond the city wall on the outskirts of Edinburgh. In fact, it struck David that the ones most critical were those with skeletons aplenty rattling away in their own backgrounds, the very people who should have kept their mouths closed. Though he didn't approve of the way they were handling things, David couldn't help but admire how Marina was pulling it off. There was nothing self-conscious or apologetic about her manner, but neither was there brashness or indelicacy. Her innate refinement and good breeding stood out in her cultured speech and manners; she was managing a difficult situation with grace and confidence.

In some ways Marina Stafford reminded him of his mother. Both had dazzling beauty, quiet determination, and natural dignity. Quite suddenly David could

see why both his father and Alexander were prepared to risk so much for the women they loved, recognizing that they had something very special, something they would never find again.

Games followed the feast. There was much merriment and laughter as the guests took turns bobbing for apples in the great vat brought into the hall for that purpose. Then they raced about like children trying to evade the clutches of the Reaper with his fake sickle, and the Scarecrow who demanded a gold coin from the men he caught and a kiss from the women. This was followed by a ribald Harvest Pageant, deliciously lewd and shocking as these plays always were, and fools and jugglers, a magician and a fortune teller.

Then came the high point of the evening, a competition to select the King and Queen of the Harvest Ball.

Alexander handsome in a pale gold brocade doublet that emphasized his dark good looks was chosen at once. Then suddenly George Gordon, Bothwell, and David Sinclair rushed to Marina and swept her up in their arms, and ignoring the tut-tutting and snorting and huffing from some of the dour older women present, deposited her on the makeshift stage beside a grinning Alex.

Up to that moment Marina had managed to carry herself well. Now, suddenly, her brittle confidence crumbled as she gazed down into the hall and saw hundreds of pairs of eyes raking her over, some of those

eyes burning with violent resentment; they looked as if they would have relished tearing her apart. Marina's face flamed a deep scarlet at finding herself the center of attention. She felt as if she were stark naked, hideously exposed and vulnerable. There was a moment when she took a step forward, when she would have jumped off the stage and fled then Alexander's arm came around her waist, and in full

view of everyone he drew her close and kissed her cheek, whispering, "Don't falter now, my dear one. Don't give them the satisfaction of besmirching our love."

A cheer rang out when they kissed, though there were a few low hisses too, but when they drew apart Marina lifted her head and flashed her most radiant smile at the company, tinged with the slightest hint of bravado. The Countess of Belrose had the honor of "crowning" them, placing wreaths made of barley sheaves, nuts, and flowers on their heads. Setting Marina's firmly on her shining pale gold hair, Alyssa smiled and whispered, "Well done! I'm proud of you."

After that Marina made up her mind that she was going to have a wonderful time.

As king and queen of the ball they led their guests into the first dance, a stately number that Marina knew and far different from the ones that followed. Then came spirited jigs and reels, the music growing fast and furious, and Marina laughing helplessly now caught up like everyone else in the paganlike atmosphere filling the hall found herself spun from partner to partner until she was dizzy and flushed with an excitement more heady than the strongest wine. She danced with Lord Blake, David, Bothwell, Huntly, and so many others that she quickly lost track of their names. There was great gaiety and not a little flirtation, and so many compliments lavished on her that Marina *did* feel somewhat queenly that night.

As she was whirled from one set of arms to another she suddenly recalled another Harvest Ball, and how innocently she had stepped into the trap set by Sedina, the Spaniard. Now she was older and wiser, she hoped; though in a different way, she was as vulnerable as ever, so she still had to be careful and not allow herself to get carried away or let down her

guard completely. Fawned over by the bold Highlanders, plied with goblet after goblet of wine, her pulse beating fast to the lilt of the wild music and her eyes dazzled by the blazing candlelight, it was not easy to keep her wits about her in a company that was growing less and less inhibited as the night wore on.

At some point Marina realized that she seemed to be in Lord Bothwell's arms more than any other's, including Alexander's. As a son of the house Alex was obliged to dance with every woman at the ball, even those who made no secret of their disgust at how he and Marina were living. With these women and most of them quite matronly he purposely danced the most hectic jigs and reels, tossing them and spinning them until they cried for mercy. Whirling the staid Lady Grant from one side of the huge room to another, and turning a deaf ear to her pleas to sit down, Alex happened to glance up as Lord Bothwell plucked a wisp of corn husk from Marina's hair, then bend down to whisper something in her ear.

Alex had never cared for Francis Stewart, Earl Bothwell, and he cared for him less now. A man a year or two older than himself, the earl was closely related to the King. Though a doughty soldier and intelligent enough, Bothwell was a notorious womanizer and had a vicious streak in his nature. He was tempestuous and overweeningly proud because of his kinship to the King, and Alex had heard while at Cumbray Castle that his unruly, arrogant behavior was causing their monarch increasing concern. His enemies at court and he had many thought him slightly mad. But Bothwell had his supporters too, people who seemed strangely enthralled by his peculiar brand of personal magnetism.

It worried Alex that his brother David was so friendly with the nobleman and spent much time with

him in Edinburgh and at his castle in Liddesdale. Upon his return from Cumbray Castle, Alex had tried to caution David, but he refused to listen. "Look to your own affairs," his brother had responded curtly. "They are not so immaculate that you should dole out advice to others."

Marina was beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable in the arms of Earl Bothwell, who had consumed a great deal of wine and was growing steadily bolder. He held her too close, his lean body constantly brushing hers, his thigh pressing against her legs, his hot fingers on her bare back. He had a narrow face, hooked nose, and

deep-set magnetic eyes that constantly sought and held hers. She was the most ravishing woman at the ball, he told her, looking as if he would have liked to ravish her. And she had the eyes of a sorceress. The body of a goddess. Hair like cloth-of-gold. One day soon she must visit his home in Liddesdale, he went on in that deep, mesmerizing voice, where he had many exciting revels and entertainments for his special friends, those with a taste for the unusual and different.

"And how do you know I am one of those?" said Marina, trying to draw back, hoping that someone would break in and rescue her from this outrageous flatterer who, in spite of the fact that they were surrounded by people, was almost making love to her on the dance floor.

He chuckled, his eyes dropping to the deep cleft between her white breasts, "I know; I recognize a like spirit when I see one."

Marina's brows rose and she laughed nervously; something about the man made her uneasy, even aside from the way he was holding her and taking every opportunity to touch and stroke her. Other men she had danced with tonight had flirted and paid her

flowery compliments; it was almost standard procedure at social functions, particularly the harvest celebrations that were more earthy and uninhibited than most. But with Francis Stewart it was different. There was nothing light-hearted in his banter; nothing playful. His hot hands gripped her tightly, burning through her clothes, his hungry fingers feeling the shape of her, carnal purpose in the way his body pressed hers, his eyes heavy-lidded with desire that he made no effort to conceal. It didn't seem to bother him that people were watching them or that Alexander might take offense. Marina sensed that Bothwell was the type of man who took what he wanted with a careless disregard for the consequences.

A warning bell rang then at the back of her mind, and Marina thought again of the Spaniard, Sedina. Bothwell, something told her, was every bit as dangerous.

She wrenched herself back from him and said coldly, "You know nothing about me, sir"

"That I would like to rectify with all speed," he purred, his eyes devouring her.

Marina turned her head away and threw a desperate glance around

the hall, relief flooding through her when she spied Alex pushing his way through the crowd toward them, a scowl on his face. His hand fell hard on Bothwell's shoulder, and without a word of greeting Alexander thrust him ignominiously aside, pulled Marina into his own arms, and swept her into the dance, leaving the King's proud relative humiliated and partnerless in the middle of the floor. There were a few titters from those around them who had witnessed the incident. It wasn't often that anyone dared put the treacherous Bothwell in his place.

When Marina glanced back at him she saw a look of pure venom on his face, and inwardly she shivered,

thinking that they might have made an enemy tonight and a powerful one at that. But since Alexander didn't seem in the least worried, she kept her thoughts to herself. In general the ball had gone far better than she'd thought it would, and she wanted nothing to spoil their enjoyment.

When the dance ended, Alex said, "The evening is not complete without a stroll under the harvest moon."

The idea appealed to Marina. By then she felt hot and disheveled from all the wild dancing and was more than eager when her lover led her outside for a cooling walk in the bright moonlight. They made their way downhill skirting the village of Lochmore, arms around each other, both well satisfied with their first venture into society together and inclined to dismiss those who had been against them.

The night was all black and silver as they meandered toward the steely glint of the loch. There was a pleasant tang of peat smoke in the air, the occasional cry of an owl hunting for its dinner and a faint rustling in the grass as tiny creatures like mice and rabbits raced for cover to avoid the cruel grasp of the feathered predators. The mountains loomed black against the star-spangled sky, the world about them still, cast in lunar light and shadow. From the castle behind them orange torches flared, glimmering through the trees, and the jaunty skirl of the pipes was muted now, gradually swallowed up by the great silence.

Walking softly on springy green moss, the couple reached the bank of the loch where the white face of the moon was reflected in the water, mysteriously serene. A hundred yards away a fox stood poised on a sterling shingled beach, coughed once, then vanished into a thicket.

They could hear each other breathe, almost hear their hearts beating.

Alex drew her down on a mossy ridge where they lay back gazing up at the sky, his arm under Marina's head, their bodies touching, each contemplating the night. After a few minutes she said softly, "If only I could capture this moment, the feel of it, the taste, beauty . . . the joy . . . and preserve it forever."

Alex looked at her in surprise. If anything, he had expected to hear complaints, because it hadn't been an easy evening for Marina to live through with the she-wolves in the Hall baying after her blood, hissing malicious remarks, some of which she must have heard. Then Bothwell, the knave, panting and pawing her how close Alex had come to throwing the swine out of the Hall!

He eyed her curiously. "Then you are not sorry you braved the horde to stand at my side?"

Marina shook her head. "I discovered tonight that I can face up to anything as long as you love me, Alex."

He took her hand and placed it against his cheek. "That you need never doubt, my darling."

He studied her as she lay beside him bathed in the moon's radiant light, her eyes soft as dark velvet, a blissful little smile on her lips, her hair somewhat mussed but even more attractive that way, and he thought she was the most beautiful woman on earth. Yet . . . it wasn't just her beauty that drew him to Marina. After all, she had been far from bonny when he had met her in Baxton Hall, but even then . . . even then he had felt powerfully attracted to her, drawn by some quality she possessed that he couldn't put a name to or define.

They gazed at each other in a kind of trance, spellbound with the magic of the love they shared, certain no others had ever experienced anything like it. Then Alex kissed her with passionate fervor, his fingers moving caressingly in her silken mass of

tumbled hair. His lips on her eyelids, her ears, cheeks, and throat, then gently pulling the dipping front of her gown down to uncover her breasts. Almost reverently he took them in his hands as a man will when he holds something precious, kissing the warm, creamy flesh, the hardening nipples, and felt the pounding of her heart against his mouth, the beat fast and urgent, every nerve in her body thrilling to

his touch.

"Oh Alex . . . my love," Marina whispered, returning his kisses and caresses with passionate devotion. "Make love to me, darling. Here! Now!"

The serenity of the night changed in the moment before Alex took possession of her. There was an aura of expectancy in the breeze ruffling the dark water of the loch, the face of the moon reflected there shimmering and dancing, spraying shafts of silver across the black surface; in the sudden flapping of wings overhead, the cry of a wolf from a lonely mountain valley. Marina breathed moist humus scents rising from their mossy bed, and as Alex leaned over her his head and shoulders were framed by a blaze of bright stars, a canopy richer than that of any king.

"My only love," he told her. "There never has nor ever will be one like you."

"Nor you," she breathed. "My Alex . . ."

He kissed her deeply, and there was a tender, cherishing quality to their lovemaking that was sweeter, more completely satisfying than their usual fiery passion, each so intent on demonstrating their love to the other that they reached a new plateau that night. Never had they been closer or felt such perfect communion with each other. Both felt that they had received a wondrous gift, one that was far beyond price. Humbled by the joy they felt, savoring its rare taste, they walked back to Augusta hand in hand, content in their silence.

As they reached the huge main door Alex and Marina were completely oblivious to everything but each other. The man standing in the shadows of a great beech tree watched them through narrowed eyes, and suddenly knew how he could strike back at Alexander Sinclair for insulting him.

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Marina stood in a field with the Earl of Belrose and watched a groom lead her daughter around the meadow on her new Highland pony, a gift from Alex's parents for her third birthday.

"She has a good seat," observed Blake as he watched his granddaughter closely, Clare proud and grinning hugely from the

saddle, and very pretty in her peacock blue riding habita present from Alex and herselfher hands in the spanking white gloves gripping the reins tight.

"Ker, don't have her sawing on his mouth," Blake shouted to the groom. "Show her how to relax her grip. And tighten his girth a little."

When the groom gently lowered the little girl's hands and demonstrated how she should hold the reins so that she didn't injure the horse's soft mouth, Blake nodded in satisfaction. "She's a quick learner.

Alex could ride like the devil by the time he was five years old. He used to frighten his mother out of her wits," he chuckled. "But all the Sinclairs have a natural affinity with horseflesh."

The chief looked so much like Alexander that Marina had warmed to him at once, in spite of the fact that he was a rather awesome figureevery tall and dark, with strong features and riveting dark eyes that bespoke of a steely determination and great force of will, the type of man that made one think twice before crossing. Now, as she smiled at him as they stood together in the warm autumn sunshine, his delight and pride in his first grandchild heartening to the woman watching him, Marina mused that if Alex looked as virile and attractive as his father did in middle age, then she would be a very lucky lass indeed.

Blake had wings of silver in his black hair and lines on his warm olive skin, but there was not an ounce of spare flesh on his body and he held himself straight and proud, still very much the master of Augusta. It charmed Marina to see daily evidence of the love between Alexander's parents. It was quite obviously still strong and potent in the way they looked at each other, the way they touched, even when they laughed softly together, heads close. That morning, when Blake returned to the castle after a short absence, Alyssa had dashed out the door to greet him, her cheeks blushing pink as a young girl's, her green eyes sparkling, and had thrown herself into his arms the instant he dismounted from his horse.

Then they had disappeared for an hour or so into their private quarters, everyone, including the servants, discreetly leaving them alone together.

"Lovely!" Marina had thought. "Pray let it always be like that with Alex and me."

For the past week the chief had been in Edinburgh with Alexander and David but had returned that morning to settle disputes at the Highland tribunal, due to convene the following day. The two younger men remained in the capital.

"How long, think you, that they will be gone?" Marina asked the earl as they watched Ker lead little Clare around the field on her pony.

" 'Tis hard to say. The King wishes speech with Alex but may keep him waiting. James is much taken up with his new Queen; he is like a child with an interesting new toy, though how long he will remain interested is debatable."

"Then he has . . . mistresses?"

Blake laughed shortly and glanced at her sideways. "Not exactly, but his favorites are akin to the same thing, if you understand me. He was raised in the company of men and much prefers their society; doubtless he feels more at ease with his own sex."

"Oh . . ." Marina blushed and looked away.

He propped a booted foot on a fallen log and leaned forward with his elbow resting on his knee, his eyes following his grandchild around the field, thinking that this was how Alyssa must have looked as a small child.

After a minute he went on, " 'Tis a great surprise to all how the King has managed to work up an intense passion for Anne of Denmark, though many are certain that it will quickly fizzle out like a spent firecracker. Still . . . for the moment James seems to be enjoying playing the gallant lover with his lady, intrigued by its very novelty, no doubt. He is spending much time alone with his young Queen and is seen less about court. The only thing capable of luring him from his love nest is the ridiculous witch hunt he has set in motion, convinced that evil powers sought to

prevent him from returning safely to Scotland with his Danish bride."

"Aye," Marina nodded, "I heard tell that the sea crossing was unusually stormy and that Queen Anne almost drowned."

" 'Twas the admiral of the ship who first suggested witchcraft as the cause of it, and Anne, very young and gullible as she is, firmly

believes it to be true. So now the King is acting the part of the bold cavalier, bound to avenge the terrible wrong done to her. One could laugh, except that he is taking it deadly seriously, sending his agents to scour the country in search of the devils responsible."

Blake turned to face her, flicking her cheek teasingly with a blade of grass. "And Marina Stafford's impatience must needs take second place to that of the King. Who can predict when Alex will return?" His brown eyes were warm, amused when they rested on her eager face. "Alas, love must wait, but I can tell you from my own experience that it will be all the sweeter and fiercer for the waiting, all the more pleasurable to quench."

Marina smiled at him shyly, her cheeks pink.

"You are very like Alexander, my lord."

"Like him too in having the good fortune to have the love of a beautiful woman," he said with a grin.

Blake caught her face between his hands, stared down intently at her for a moment, then kissed her on the forehead. Marina's heart soared at this demonstration of affection and approval from the chief and suddenly, for the first time, she felt at one with the clan and no longer a stranger. It was as if a great warm Highland plaid had surrounded her with its sheltering warmth and protection. I never want to leave here, she thought when Blake let her go.

Clare finished with her riding lesson and came

rushing up, all breathless and excited, to be seized by her grandfather and tossed high into the air, then carried back to Castle Augusta in his arms.

All of Edinburgh turned out to see the captured witches paraded through the streets in an open cart on their way to the dungeons of Edinburgh Castle, five women and two men of various ages, all stripped naked and exposed to the late October chill, huddled together like animals on their way to be slaughtered.

The crowd howled and jeered at them and pelted them with stones, rotten fruit, even excrement from the gutter as the wagon was slowly trundled through the town, the pace leisurely to afford onlookers a chance to gape at and vent their fury on these disciples of the devil, every foot they traveled pure hell for the unfortunates shivering

together inside the cart. Though they had yet to be tried and convicted, they could see, from the screaming mob packed tight along each side of the street, barely held in check by sweating constables, that they had already been judged guilty of the vilest of crimes.

"Burn them!" the people roared. "Roast them alive!"

Hearing the noise, Alexander ran out of Bell's Tavern where he had been having an informal meeting with the Gordons, Hamilton, Fraser, and others, in time to see the wagon turning into the street. The driver, clad in red livery, sat haughtily on his high seat behind the two horses, his nose raised fastidiously as if to distance himself from what was taking place behind him while three guards with pistols kept prodding and leering at the prisoners with whom they shared the cart.

Alex and his friends pushed their way to the front of the throng. They were startled to spy two people they

recognized among the accused, Felicity MacBride, the wife of a prominent city lawyer, and Jerome Wellesley, a groom at Holyrood Palace.

"Dear Christ!" Alex cried. "Has the whole city gone mad?"

Aghast, his eyes were drawn to Mistress MacBride, still in her twenties and a comely woman, now frantically trying to cover her nakedness with her hands while constantly forced to raise them to try to protect herself from the missiles hurled at her with such force that blood streamed down her body in rivulets. They were all injured and bleeding and covered with filth, and as the wagon came abreast of them, Alexander suddenly spotted a young prisoner well along in pregnancy. For an instant her eyes met his, mutely beseeching, then she wailed, "I'm innocent! Innocent! Help me for the sake of my babe."

Shocked, sickened, and suddenly furious at the revolting spectacle, Alex drew his sword and jumped out into the road. The cart came to a sudden stop, but before Alex could take action, his friends rushed up behind him and physically dragged him back, George Gordon shouting, "For the love of God, Sinclair, stay out of this! 'Tis not a business you want meddling in."

A lump of horse manure meant for the witches struck the driver of the vehicle, almost knocking him off his perch and splattering his smart red tunic and his snooty face with dung. The watching crowd shrieked with laughter, and so comical a sight did he make as he coughed and

spluttered and gingerly tried to clean himself off that others began pelting him with muck until he was forced to whip up the horses and speed away to evade his tormentors, reduced by now to almost as vile a state as his prisoners.

His name was Crockett and he was livid with fury. All the way back to the castle he turned the name that

George Gordon had shouted over and over in his mind. "Sinclair," he muttered to himself, "you are going to be muckle sorry for this. *Muckle* sorry!"

In the tavern Alexander and his friends tried to wash the sour taste from their mouths with several quick gulps of ale.

"Mistress MacBride!" Alex shook his head. "How could she have been brought into this?"

Fraser shrugged. "None are exempt from suspicion, it seems, even the highest in the land. They perhaps most of all, since they have more to gain by bringing about the King's destruction." And he named several noblemen living near the capital who had fallen under suspicion. "They are said to be a part of a demonic pact whereby they come to an arrangement with Satan. In exchange for their souls, the devil invests them with special powers which can be used for gain or to bring down their enemies."

"What nonsense!" Alex laughed.

"Aye, but many believe in it," said Gordon. "And it has a special appeal for those among the new faith, which many are said to adhere to."

In a way Alex could see how this could be. Calvinists believed in predestination, whereby a child was born either among the elect or the reprobate, their eventual fate preordained. The elect would go to heaven after death, and the reprobate to hell and there was absolutely nothing they could do about it. If someone believed in their own reprobation, or was made to believe, then forming a pact with the devil would seem natural. . . .

"To think," he said, "that such things can still go on in this enlightened age. But that aside" his face hardened " 'twas fiendish cruel and unnecessary to subject these poor wretches to the ire of the rabble, and one of them with child, when they have

yet to be proved guilty."

"Oh, their guilt is a foregone conclusion," said Hamilton. "Few will not confess under torture."

Alex remembered the eyes of the pregnant woman and felt sick.

"I will appeal to the King himself," he announced.

His companions exchanged a look of pure horror, and several chimed in at once to urge him to banish the thought from his mind. "To stand up for them would only make you seem one of them in His Majesty's eyes," warned Gordon. "Besides, it would do no good. They will all be burned and mayhap you and yours with you if you interfere."

Alex got drunk that night, but he still couldn't get the eyes of the pregnant prisoner out of his mind. Yet . . . George Gordon was right. There was nothing he could do, nothing he *dared* do without putting his family at risk.

At the beginning of November Alexander finally had his audience with King James, who was a year younger than himself, yet in an odd way seemed older. James had grown up surrounded by adults, many of them elderly, learned men, and much of their habits and mannerisms had rubbed off on him. He was mild-mannered, clever, enjoyed good conversation and jesting with his friends, but he had never seemed young, even as a boy. Now, in his early maturity, the King had developed a paternal manner that sat well on him in spite of his youth.

"Ah, my braw Alexander!" he greeted Sinclair when he was shown into the Audience Chamber. "Glad I am to see you sprung from that English fortress, and a might of bother it was too, getting you freed."

He held out his hand to be kissed.

Alex thanked him for his effort to have him released

and James, with one of his uninhibited gestures for which he was well known suddenly rose and embraced him. " 'Twas a noble deed," he said, "to attempt to rescue the Queen, my mother."

The King motioned for a servitor to come forward. The man carried a satin pillow on which lay a heavy chain of gold, with a medallion at its center, inscribed, and studded around the edge with diamonds and

seed pearls. There was no ceremony involved. James was essentially a simple man who disliked pomp and fanfare. With his own hands he lifted the chain from the pillow and carefully arranged it around Alexander's neck, saying, "For great valor in the service of the Crown." Then he stepped back, smiling, able to be relaxed and benevolent now that the difficulties surrounding his mother's death lay three years in the past. "I would have you wear that on all public occasions," he said, anxious that others should note that the King rewarded loyal and courageous subjects. "And if ever you should have a special boon to ask of me, send me the medallion and it shall be granted."

Alexander again dropped to his knee and kissed the royal hand.

James gazed down on the proud dark head of the Highland nobleman bent respectfully before him and reminded himself that the Sinclairs had always been loyal to the Crown. The medallion was worth a great deal of money, it was true, but others less deserving had received far more magnificent rewards for pleasing their King. Alexander Sinclair would have to wait it not for some disquieting information that had recently come to the royal ear and not from just one source, but two. The first he might have discounted, even though it had been brought to him from his cousin Bothwell, to the effect that Alex had become close friends with the Earl of Essex while in England,

and through him had been lured into working for Queen Elizabeth as a spy. Essex and not Alex himself so said Bothwell, had been the means of Sinclair being released, but only on condition that he agree to engage in subversive activities for England.

Then a short time ago his chancellor, Maitland, had come to him to report another unsettling piece of news. A man called Hamish Crockett, in service at the castle, accused Sinclair of obstructing him in the performance of his duties while conducting suspected witches to stand trial for their crimes. Sinclair had gone so far as to draw his sword as if to attack this man, and was prevented from doing so only by the intervention of his companions. Further, there were numerous witnesses to the incident.

James knew that Alexander had always been a reckless hothead, but until now his activities had been for worthy causes, and for the right side. His courage and fidelity had never before been questioned, and now that he had matured and, ostensibly, had learned restraint, James had planned to make him one of his most important ministers. Now . . . now the King decided to adopt a policy of wait and see, still

far from convinced as Bothwell seemed to be that Alex was a traitor.

Wine was served and, as James liked to do, they chatted informally.

"I would like to know all that happened while you were in England," said the King, smiling pleasantly.

Alex chuckled. "I fear, Your Majesty, that it will make dull relating. Not much of interest can happen to a man behind bars."

James sipped from a silver goblet, watching him over the rim.

"You doubtless made some contacts amongst the

English nobility while in the Tower? I understand many of them languish there. They say they hail each other from cell to cell and oftentimes meet if allowed out for exercise. Firm friendships come from shared desperation."

For a while they chatted about people and conditions in the Tower, Alex beginning to wonder why the King showed so much interest, and soon James brought the subject around to Essex. "What think you of this new favorite of the Queen's?"

Alexander's brows rose. "I never met Devereux. He was not in London at the time I left the Tower."

"Ah, but a good friend of the Sinclairs nevertheless, eh?"

Alex stared hard at the King, a man of his own age but much shorter of stature, bearded, with deep-set eyes, a humorous curve to his mouth, erudite and likable, a peace lover. James was known to hate violence; even the weapons of war caused him distress, and no one ever unsheathed a blade in his presence, even to pare an apple at table. He controlled his turbulent, frequently ferocious nobles with his adroit brain rather than a sword, and had done so successfully up to that time. It was that facile mind that one had to be wary of with James Stewart.

"The Sinclairs would count anyone a friend who worked for our good," Alex replied evenly.

"Then you have friends in high places in London."

"It would seem one, at least."

"A friend *very* close to Queen Elizabeth."

"The Earl of Essex appears to enjoy her favor."

The King leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs, the gems in his garters gleaming dully; they looked dusty. The wide cartwheel ruff around his neck sagged, and a seam at the shoulder of his rich doublet

was beginning to separate. Though he was slim and compact, the upper part of his body was wide and his arms powerful and muscular, a testimony to his fondness for riding and hunting, always atop some blooded, high-spirited horse. He cared nothing for grand attire, but a fine horse always brought a shine of excitement to his gray-blue eyes, as did verbal fencing with a mind as sharp and quick as his own.

He said, " 'Tis fortunate that you were never racked while in the Tower."

Alexander nodded. "Fortunate indeed."

"Unusual," His Majesty purred.

"I believe that to be true."

"And I'm told you have taken a fancy to a bonny English woman and brought her back into Scotland, leaving her cuckolded husband to wonder where she vanished to."

Bothwell! Sudden rage darkened Sinclair's tanned face and brought a dangerous gleam to his eyes. Recalling how the King's cousin had recently been humiliated at Castle Augusta and well deserving it! Alex knew the reason behind all this questioning. Francis Stewart had taken his revenge by putting a doubt in the King's mind regarding his loyalty!

"I confess to surprise that my Lord Bothwell would consider this matter of enough import to report it to Your Majesty," Alexander replied coldly, striking at the heart of the trouble, suddenly weary of this verbal sparring.

James was annoyed at his boldly naming the man responsible, especially when that man was related to him; he felt as if the tenor of the interview had been wrested out of his hands, and this he found irksome and insulting.

"Bothwell was not the *only* courtier at Castle Augusta that night," the King pointed out.

"But the only one with a grudge against Alexander Sinclair."

The hooded eyes narrowed. "Answer me this: Why did you obstruct a royal servant in the performance of his duties?" asked James, abruptly changing the subject. "I refer to the fellow in charge of conducting the witches to Edinburgh Castle."

The look that came over Sinclair's face sent a chill through the King. He suddenly regretted his penchant for informality, his careless habit of interviewing some of his noblemen alone, a habit his chancellor was very much opposed to. Sitting before him now was a man who feared no one, as Sinclair had demonstrated time and again. Now that man was staring at him with murderous anger stamped on his dark face, his sword within inches of his hand, a fleet horse waiting for him outside. One swift stroke and he could be cut down, nor would he be the first to die under the hands of a noble assassin, and his Highland lords were far more intractable than most. In minutes Alexander Sinclair could be galloping back to the fastness of the mountains, there to be surrounded by the might of his own clan and well supported by other clans who were traditional allies of the Sinclairs. Once away from the capital there would be very little that could be done short of plunging the country into rebellion. Alexander was a hero to the people! That they would back him the King had no doubt. As it was, there would be many who would sneer at the poor way he had thanked Sinclair for trying to save his mother, the Queen.

Alexander leaned forward, fixing him with eyes gone flat and cold.

"Witches?" he questioned. "But I understood that the prisoners had yet to be tried, let alone found guilty."

James ran a finger around his ruff, which he realized was too tight.

"They, ah . . . would not have been arrested without there being serious evidence agin them," he countered. "All of it will come out at the trials next week."

"Next week?" Sinclair's brows rose mockingly. "Yet they have already been paraded through the streets as if they had been adjudged guilty." He paused, a pulse throbbing at his jaw as he sought to control his anger and disgust. "One of the women, not more than sixteen or

seventeen years old, was far gone with child! yet naked like the others, bruised and battered and bleeding from the abuse of the crowd. That is justice?" When the King said nothing, he announced, disregarding the consequences in his fury, "I readily admit that I tried to put an end to this woman's torment, as would anyone else with a shred of compassion and decency left in him. Aye, and I would do so again!"

James dropped his eyes to his hands, horrified at the picture Sinclair had put in his mind. He hated violence, though he recognized that at times it was necessary for his own protection and that of his Kingdom; but when it *was* necessary he had no desire to have the details thrust down his throat as they had been now.

"I know nothing of such a woman," he said, "but will look into the matter at once." He defended himself. "These devil worshipers cannot be allowed to swell and grow. They sought to encompass the death of my royal person and that of my Queen. Forget not that there are those in this land who would have preferred me to marry Catherine of Navarre. The Queen is aware of this and is sorely afraid that these

traitors mean to destroy her."

"I am not one of them," Alexander made clear.

No, thought the King, he didn't think he was. Sinclair was the type to scorn black magic; he was not the sort to engage in furtiveness and dark deeds behind the scenes or to subjugate himself to *any* master, whether Satan or anyone else. Alex had too forthright and open a nature, and too much confidence in himself to hide his activities in demonic cults where secrecy was imperative. James was inclined to suspect that if there was a serpent amongst his nobles, it was not Alexander Sinclair, though he supposed that time would tell.

The King eyed him consideringly.

"I sense that you put little stock in witchcraft?"

"None," came the terse response.

James leaned forward. "Aye, but there *are* such people, Sinclair," he insisted. "Those with special powers over their fellows; even, in some cases, over animals." In his extensive reading on the subject, James went on, he had learned some astounding things about demonology and lycanthropy, how in some of the remote countries certain natives had the ability to send their spirits into the bodies of wild animals

such as panthers and hyenas, thereby using these creatures to kill in their stead. "Hence the legend of the werewolf." Some had the ability to cause another's death by simply casting a spell on him. "And the victim wastes away and dies."

"Because it has been *suggested* to him that he would; suggested to a believer. Sorcery cannot hurt those who don't believe," Alex maintained.

But it was obvious that the subject had caught the King's imagination, and that alone was dangerous. Whether one believed or not, he said firmly, the

demon worshipers did, and that alone could cause havoc because these people were feared and could infect others and bend them to their will. Therefore they represented a serious threat to authority, to law and order, and must be stamped out.

"Do you know," James went on gravely, "that some of my men, who would face up to anything, are reluctant to hunt down these demons? Secretly they are sorely afraid of them lest some death spell be cast over them. They make excuses to get out of the task; some simply disappear rather than face them. My own men, Sinclair!" he said angrily. "More afraid of these creatures than they are of my displeasure!"

Finally Alexander understood. The King was engaged in a power struggle and the witches were subversives like any other; *that* was why he was so intent on stamping them out. James's pet project was to bring law and order to his turbulent country, and indeed he had been more successful in that aim than any of his ancestors. Though he used less force, he had managed to achieve more, possibly because he had taken the time to understand the nature of his people, particularly the nobility. There had been surprisingly few plots against him and he was generally liked and respected because he had taken pains to discover their weaknesses and strengths and knew how to handle them.

But there were still those few out to bring down the King. Call them witches or whatever, they still posed a threat to the monarchy. That Alexander understood, and he could see where the King would naturally be anxious to find the culprits and rid himself of them. Alex suddenly wondered if witchcraft was merely the cover for a more dangerous conspiracy against the Crown, and who might be behind it.

James saw understanding dawning on Alex's face, and smiled.

"I may have a post for you, Sinclair," he announced, thinking at the same time that it would be a good way to test the nobleman's loyalty.

Alex waited, wondering what was coming.

"I am putting you in charge of the witch hunt."

25

In early November Edgar Stafford was finally able to set out for Scotland. He had with him his new squire, Fordyce, and five of his brawniest men, all of them armed to the teeth and mounted on decent horseflesh for a change. Stafford had splurged on horses and weapons; he was no fool and knew what they would be up against. He also knew that once in the vicinity of Castle Augusta they would have to go underground and use cunning and stealth to reach Marina and the child, which was the reason he had left some of his men behind. Too many would merely make things awkward and hinder rather than help.

Fordyce was his second squire since Tar left him. The first had lasted only a week when Edgar caught him stealing. In fact, it was getting harder all the time to procure good men who were honest and willing to work, and to keep the fellows one had from being lured into better-paying jobs. None of the ones with

him now had been in his employment more than a year, and there were times when Stafford wished fervently that he had the old guard back, aging though they had been. At least they had been loyal and respectful, which was something he couldn't say about the present crew.

Take Fordyce, for instance. Edgar had had to lift the whip to him three days before when the young man, only twenty-one years old, had had the temerity to dictate to him. " 'Tis overlate in the year to venture into the north of Scotland," he'd said in his cocksure, opinionated way. "We'll have foul weather to contend with as well as the savages of the North, and 'tis hard to say which of them will be worse. This venture should be delayed until next spring."

Edgar had gone purple in the face with frustration and anger, furious that such a young buck would dare try to tell him what to do. Had Tar

still been with him and how he wished he was! Stafford was convinced that his wife and child would already be back behind the thick walls of Baxton Hall and he no longer an object of scorn and ridicule.

Edgar roared that there would be no delay as he set about the outspoken young squire with his whip, as he had done with many another before him, for a master who allowed a mere servant to domineer him would soon find *himself* dancing at the end of a string. The beating had served its purpose too. Thereafter Fordyce had been most courteous and amenable, listening respectfully as Edgar outlined the plan and promising to pass it on to his subordinates. Even the rest of the men, always inclined to be sullen, seemed more agreeable.

The only other thing Fordyce had ventured to suggest, meekly and with his hat in his hand, was that bribes might be necessary once they reached the

Highlands. "To open doors that otherwise would be bound to be shut fast against us, sir."

"I have thought of that," Edgar assured him.

Now, as they rode in the direction of the border, Stafford was very conscious of the gold carefully sewn into his old leather jerkin, gold he would certainly have to part with to get his wife and child back. "By the mass, the expense and trouble that wench has cost me!" he fumed inwardly. "Aye, and the danger she has exposed me to as well." It was one thing to slink over the border for rousing skirmishes with the natives there, then quickly gallop back into England with stolen cattle or other booty, if they were lucky. But it was quite another matter to ride deep into enemy territory far away from his homeland, with no easy route of escape should things go agin them. Marina would pay for this once he got her back. He would keep her so fast a prisoner that she would never see the light of day, except through a barred window! As for the child she was so devoted to, Clare would be sent far away for her education to a distant relative of his in Cornwall, and her mother would never know where. But at least he would have them both under his jurisdiction once more, as was right and proper. Then and only then could he hold up his head in the county and move about without having people snigger behind his back.

It was fortunate, he supposed, that it was now quite common for travelers to move between the two countries. Provided they showed no hostility and behaved in a polite, circumspect manner, it was often

possible to journey on without being molested or challenged, at least in the South of Scotland. In the South they were more used to foreign traffic between England and Edinburgh, the capital, and in some districts they

were quite friendly to the strangers. But it was an altogether different story in the North, so Stafford had heard. Hideous stories had filtered back to England about the Highland barbarians, as wild and savage, so it was said, as the territory they lived in. Edgar suddenly wished he were twenty years younger, that he had his old, dependable men with him, and above all that Tar rode at his side instead of Fordyce. The new lot seemed keen enough now, but alas, their master had far less confidence in them. But, he thought stoically, they were the best that he could get.

Never once did it cross Stafford's mind to abandon the chase and let his wife go, to return to his Hall and live out his remaining years in peace, recognizing that there were some things a man just couldn't have, and to be grateful for the things he *did* have robust good health, a few friends who admired him for his bravery, and more than enough money to last him for the rest of his days. He was no philosopher and these things didn't occur to him but they occurred to his men. They sat around the campfire muttering while Edgar's snores rang out from his tent.

"Listen to the old dog," said one with a nod in the direction of his master's shelter. "What can he want with a young wife? He wouldn't have the stamina to satisfy her."

"He's no real man," another whispered. "He's much like a castrated bull, according to Tar, and unfit to service a woman."

"She's run before and will do so again. We are risking our lives to pander to his vanity. I tell you now, we will not get out of the Highlands alive or 'twill be a miracle."

There was a pause while they mulled this over, their faces grim in the red glow of the fire, darkness pressing

around them, then someone suggested tentatively, "Mayhap we should all steal away now while he sleeps . . ."

But one of the older ones reminded them, " 'Tis not easy to find work, and a man has to eat."

Finally Fordyce spoke up, now that he had their measure.

"Stafford is carrying a small fortune in gold."

No one said anything, but they all looked at each other, and one by one they began to smile.

Alyssa Sinclair was very proud of the Lochmore Hospice, a combination hospital and orphanage midway between the village of Lochmore and the neighboring one of Blairafton. The rambling old house belonged to the Sinclairs but had rarely been used except for storage, and Alyssa had easily persuaded her husband to let her take it over to try her experiment. The near-derelect building had been repaired, and the junglelike gardens and meadows surrounding it cut back, the trees pruned, the lawns reseeded. Now, though plain and far from the grand establishment it had been two hundred years ago, it was freshly painted, clean, and above all provided a warm, comfortable shelter for the sick and destitute.

There were forty orphans in Lochmore Hospice, and almost the same number of sick people at any given time, all presided over by a director called Ben Greer, the son of a physician who had once saved Lady Alyssa's life. Greer had several assistants, and there were men to tend the fields and orchards, for Lochmore Hospice grew most of its own food and raised its own stock, with everyone old enough and fit enough to work contributing their energy and talents to make the place prosper.

Marina had never seen or heard of anything like it,

and was highly impressed as its founder proudly conducted her on a tour of the large building, where she knew almost everyone by name down to the youngest orphan. The children clustered around her with cries of delight, some running to show the countess their latest projects, from sewing to woodwork, for they were encouraged to learn crafts or trades that would help them to be self-sufficient in the future.

Marina was greatly touched to see the small hands holding up their work for approval, and the shine in their eyes when Alyssa praised their efforts or gave constructive and kindly criticism while taking pains to see that the shyer children weren't overlooked. Her patience, gentleness, and warmth were genuine, and the little ones had sensed it from the first and responded with a burst of love for their patron that brought tears to Marina's eyes. And it was the same in the infirmary on the other side of the building, where many of the patients were old

people who were simply tired and worn out, with nowhere else to go.

"Some of the children were found abandoned in alleys and even in the woods," Alyssa explained as they walked around. "And most of the elderly patients, no longer able to work, were starving; some had been cast out by their own families, thus leaving them with one less mouth to feed. Many are not from this area at allcountry people tend to take care of their ownbut were found by the ladies who work for me in Edinburgh."

"Oh, why are there not more places like this?"

Alyssa smiled ruefully. "Why indeed. There should be; we as Christians have an obligation to help those less fortunate than ourselves. If we have luck then we must share it, or risk having it taken away."

Marina seized her hand. "I want to help, lady. You

must tell me what I can do."

"I will," Alyssa said, smiling, "and gladly. A place like this"she waved her hand"takes much money to maintain, for all that they make their own clothes and grow most of their own food. Money must be raised to keep it going, and that comes mainly from donations. Not always given willingly, but given just the same." She laughed, a glint in her green eyes. "Now you have witnessed the soft Lady Alyssa, but shortly you will witness the tough one."

From Lochmore Hospice they rode around the countryside stopping at the homes of merchants, landowners, lairds, and anyone the countess suspected of having money to spare to collect for the hospice. And Alyssa was tough, Marina noticed, when she needed to be. Though some gave generously and few cared to offend the wife of the chief, there were two or three, people like Lady Grant of Gower Castle, who donated most grudgingly and made no secret of their reluctance. Her contribution was a keg of sour ale and two scrawny chickens, duly loaded into the back of the cart with everything else, though Marina was surprised when the countess expressed her intention of having them tossed into the midden.

"You think they might have gone off?"

Alyssa chuckled grimly. "Nay. I think they might be poisoned."

"What!"

The countess shook her head. "Mayhap I am over-suspicious, but that woman's pious attitude . . . it strikes me as being false. Serena Grant's mother, Lady Magdalen, was my greatest enemy while she lived, and I suspect that Serena is my enemy too, for all her show of affability. I doubt not that she would do me a mischief if she could."

On the ride home to Castle Augusta the whole story

of Alyssa's background came out. Much of it Marina had heard before from Alexander, but his mother filled in details that painted a much more vivid picture of how her father's first wife had tried to destroy her. It was a shocking story of revenge and murder and left no doubt in Marina's mind that Lady Magdalen MacKellar had been a ruthlessly evil woman who had perpetrated heinous crimes against an innocent child, determined to cheat Alyssa out of her rightful inheritance. And she had almost succeeded too! Only Alyssa's courage and resolve to fight for what was hers had saved her.

More and more, Marina found herself admiring Alexander's mother. Though she enjoyed a high position now, her youth had not been easy, and she would never have attained her birthright had she not fought for it nor the love of Blake Sinclair either.

Glancing at the older woman as they rode slowly home, Marina found it easy to envision how beautiful Alyssa must have been in her youth. She was beautiful now in her middle years! The forest green riding habit she wore was a perfect foil for her flaming red hair, white skin, the clear jade green of her eyes. But her beauty was not merely skin deep that was what gave her a radiance that set her apart from other comely women Marina had known. As she had witnessed today, the countess truly cared about people, particularly those who were as helpless, as destitute and frightened as she herself had once been; and as she had once fought for justice for herself, so did she fight for others in a similar position.

Marina hoped that her little daughter, who so strongly resembled her grandmother physically, would also be like her in character. She made up her mind to help Alyssa with the hospice all she could, believing as she did that if one had good fortune it

must be shared with those less well endowed, and Marina felt that she had been privileged indeed to have met Alyssa Sinclair.

The countess broke the silence that had fallen between them.

"Did you know that Lady Grant is related to Lord Bothwell?"

Marina looked at her sharply. "Nay . . . I didn't knowbut I would not trust that one either."

"She is related to him through her mother, Lady Magdalen." Alyssa's lovely face clouded and she confessed, "How I wish that David and Bothwell were not such close friends! There is something about that fellow . . ."

Marina chuckled thinly. "I know exactly what you mean?"

"Then you don't think I am being fanciful and unfair?"

Marina hesitated. She herself had no desire to be unfair, to set herself up in judgment of anyone, especially a man she hardly knew. Bothwell, after all, was not the only man to be overly familiar with women. Wrong as it was, Marina could see where he might imagine that his lofty status gave him the right to take what he wanted, and doubtless there were many women impressed by his high position and kinship to the King, and all too willing to succumb to him. She could understand that the attention he receivedfrom men and women bothmight have gone to his head.

"My instinct is not to like him," Marina replied carefully. "But then I scarcely know his lordship."

"And *my* instinct tells me that we will like him less once we know him better," said Alyssa with a sigh.

They exchanged rueful smiles, both feeling much closer to each other now that they were beginning to

understand each other better, and the last of the formality vanished between them and they became friends.

Alexander remained in Edinburgh for weeks, then returned in mid-November to tell them that he had been given an important post by the King, one he didn't seem too impressed by. "Though I can see why James would wish to stamp out traitorous malcontents, call them demons or witches or whatever you will, the names mean little."

Tongue in cheek, he showed them his reward for his efforts to save the King's mother, and they all admired the beautifully wrought medallion, the men much less effusive than the women. David was

openly scornful. "James is a mean churl. He has a niggardly way of honoring the valiant. To think that that bauble is the only thing you have to show for sacrificing more than three years of your life for almost losing your head! Bah, he has no kingly spirit in him! The man is a tight-fisted coward."

"Treasonable words, my son," cautioned his father. "I would hope you would not bruit such remarks about in Edinburgh?"

David shrugged, muttering, "All know how he is, Bothwell more than most. Even kinship cannot shame the King into generosity."

"It seems to me," said Alex, "that James has been *most* generous with Bothwell. Few would disdain the post of Lord Admiral of Scotland, nor the many castles and land with the revenue from that land that have come his way. Mayhap Stewart would like to be named heir to the throne."

David flushed, though indeed he sometimes wondered if that wasn't exactly what Bothwell hankered after. He scowled at his brother for bringing it out into

the open. "I see you have a mind to mock my friend."

"Nay," Alex replied pleasantly, "'twas just a thought that crossed my mind."

"You have been listening to Maitland and Moray," he challenged. "'Tis just like you to fall in with the opposition, to set yourself up as the King's sword, for bigod, James cannot handle one." His angry dark eyes looked his brother up and down and he added contemptuously, "So now he hides behind the strong arm of Sinclair, eh? Doubtless he thinks he has our clan at his disposal as well. 'Twould seem that the King has forgotten who will lead that clan one day, and it won't be Alexander Sinclair!"

A dreadful silence fell over the family seated around the blazing hall fire, supposedly taking their ease. Even the two wolfhounds looked up from their slumber, as if sensing the tension crackling around their shaggy heads.

"And it seems that *you* have forgotten who leads it now," said the Earl of Belrose, his tone ominously quiet. "Mayhap in your mind you already see me in my grave," he went on, "and yourself at the helm of the clan?"

David blanched, his throat working, shame in his eyes now as he saw the way they were all looking at him, especially his mother.

"Nay . . . I never entertained such a thought," he stammered, glancing beseechingly from one parent to the other. "You must not think that, for 'twould be the darkest day of my life." Then he forced himself to meet Alexander's eyes, loving him, hating him, and above all riddled with a confused feeling of guilt, and resenting the reason for his guilt. "My pardon, brother. I deeply regret that remark."

Alexander nodded. There were times when he wanted to embrace David, to soothe his troubled

spirit as he had often done when they were both small boys and his little brother was upset over something. But at other times he felt like beating sense into his head, and all the foolish notions out of it, but neither tactic would have done any good, as he had long since found out. David was exceedingly obstinate and bound and determined not to allow his older brother to influence him or advise him in any way, so different from when they had been children. Now he made a point of taking the contrary stance in everything, and it was fast reaching the ridiculous stage.

The incident led to a quarrel between Alex and Marina.

The minute they were alone in their room she chided, "You should not have provoked David by making that comment about Bothwell lusting after the Crown."

Alexander was greatly taken aback, startled at being blamed and by Marina. "Must I now watch and weigh every word I utter to my family or risk ruffling my brother David's feathers?" he retorted irritably. "Is he so thin-skinned that he cannot hear aught but what he wants to hear?"

"He is very sensitive, Alex"

"Pah! He is very arrogant, more like. It comes from keeping company with that scoundrel Bothwell. Stewart has put some dangerous notions in his head, methinks, ideas that want knocking out."

Marina eyed him in alarm as Alex threw off his clothes, tossing them over the backs of chairs. His dark face was grim; she could see that he was hurt and annoyed at being held responsible for starting the argument downstairs, but in all honesty Marina felt that he had been

responsible, even if it was unintentional.

"Surely you would not think of knocking these

ideas out yourself?" she asked him uneasily.

Alex threw himself down naked on the bed and gave her a measuring look.

"It may yet come to that"

"God's soul, Alex, don't even consider it!" Marina cried, her dark eyes wide with alarm. She went on heatedly, angry at him now, "Give a thought to your parents. Think how they would feel seeing their two sons battling it out. Marry, but you both act likelike children with no thought for anyone but yourselves"

"Come to bed," Alex broke in. " 'Tis too late for a lecture."

"Like you, I will say my piece," Marina snapped, adding sarcastically, "Aye, whether it ruffles your feathers or not."

He leaned over and blew out the candle, leaving her to undress in the dark. "I mislike seeing your face all twisted up in anger," he said. " 'Tis most uncomely that way."

"Youyou are every bit as arrogant as David!"

"I hope you will forgive me if I put a pillow over my ears. I have had little rest in Edinburgh and would like to do so now. Good eve!"

"Oh . . . !" Peering down at the bed, where she could vaguely see Alex lying with a pillow over his head, Marina felt like snatching the heavy pewter candlestick from the nearby table and hurling it at him. "Don't think that you are lily-white and blameless," she said, giving him a hard poke in the back. "You, sir, have less excuse for your conduct, since you are older and should know better."

The only response was a loud, fake snore.

Marina finished undressing, made as if to get into bed, then instead felt her way to the door that led into the adjoining chamber, wishing that she had little

Clare to cuddle up to. But the child had been moved to the Augusta

nursery weeks before and Lady Alicia's old nursemaid had been brought back to take care of her. Marina entered the empty chamber and slammed the door closed.

The air in the room was chilly compared to the one next door. Since the room wasn't being used, no fire had been lit nor any warming pans slipped between the sheets to heat up the bed. Marina gasped aloud as the cold linen came in contact with her skin; she lay down gingerly, clenching her teeth, and hastily drew the covers up to her nose. There she lay, freezing, and fuming at Alex.

She supposed, on thinking it over, that it wasn't unusual for there to be a certain amount of competitiveness between brothers. Marina had witnessed some of this between the males in the Percy family where squabbles had frequently broken out over some difference of opinion, each maintaining that his viewpoint was right. But . . . this trouble between Alex and David was more serious, though, to be honest, she felt that David was mostly to blame. Alex had told her more than once that he accepted the situation at Augusta; that he was the type of man who relished the challenge of making his own way in the world, and she could certainly believe that, understanding his nature as she did. Still . . . perhaps in some deep way even if he himself wasn't conscious of it Alex *did* resent the fact that his younger brother would inherit the title of Earl of Belrose and the chieftainship that went with it. Alex was a man born to lead; would it not be galling for such a man to be under the command of another? Marina brooded. As for David, he was determined to keep his forceful older brother in his place and never allow him to usurp him. Marina couldn't help but feel that their relationship to each

other boded ill for the future, when the time came when David Sinclair became chief.

The animosity between the brothers was the only blight to Marina's happiness at Castle Augusta, and she knew that it troubled their parents as well, especially their mother. And it brought something else home to Marina. She and Alex were in a similar situation with Clare, especially if any future children they might have were daughters. If they had a son, he would inherit and they would be spared the anguish the Earl and Countess of Belrose were going through now.

Alex didn't see things in quite the way Marina did. When she had brought the subject up, because it troubled her, he had said, "Marina, parents naturally want to do all they can for their offspring, but they

cannot tailor their lives to suit any future children they might have. They too are individuals. Remember, we only pass this way once. So they have a right to seize all the love and happiness they can while they can, and I certainly bear no grudges against my parents for what they did. The idea is ludicrous! Anyway, 'tis better for children to grow up to observe real love between their mother and father and to know they are the result of that love than to be the spawn of a cold, loveless union."

When he spoke thus, Marina was convinced that he meant it, that David more than Alex had to come to terms with the situation, which in a way struck her as odd since David was the one with everything to gain . . .

Suddenly Marina saw the truth. Alex made David feel guilty! And who wants to be confronted with the object of one's guilt?

It will be better, she thought, when we move to live at Cumbray Castle. Then the brothers won't have to

see each other so much. It was sad . . . but for the good of them both, necessary.

Still shivering under the covers, Marina had a sharp longing for her little daughter, but of course Clare wasn't just hers anymore. Now she had to be shared with so many others, her grandparents, numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins. That very night the child was away "getting to know her people," as Alyssa put it. She was visiting Jason and Lizette Sinclair, cousins of the chief, and doubtless enjoying herself immensely among their many grandchildren. Aunt Kirstin too claimed the little girl frequently; Kirstin was as yet childless and poured out all her motherly instincts on her tiny niece.

Ah . . . Marina was happy that her daughter's horizons were expanding, even if it had been a painful adjustment to let her go. At least she had the assurance that Clare was with people who loved her; her own people who had her best interests at heart. Generally, they had been well-received by the Sinclairs, though there were one or two who made no secret of the fact that they disapproved and would have preferred to see Alexander properly married to a Scottish woman one with a large dowry. "Ignore them," Alex advised. "I do."

Marina twisted and turned under the covers, unable to get comfortable. Raising herself to paw about for the extra quilt folded neatly at the bottom of the bed, she noticed a glimmer of light coming

under the door from the adjoining room and took a great satisfaction in seeing that Alex too was awake.

Brute! she thought, glaring at the door, you deserve to lie awake all night for shutting me out like this when I would talk to you about something that concerns both of us. And I *will* have my say whether you like it or not! Aye, even if it means that you have to hear

something you don't like.

Suddenly the door between the rooms banged open. Alex stood there, tall and powerful, his naked body framed by the candlelight behind him.

"A cold welcome I get when I rush home from Edinburgh to see you," he grumbled. "I would have done better to stay in the city."

Marina raised herself up on her elbows. "You must do as you wish, my lord."

"I wish to jump into bed beside you. 'Tis fiendish chilly standing here like this."

She smiled and threw back the covers.

26

Alex got into bed beside her. Their cold flesh met. And quite suddenly they were tumbling together, embracing fiercely, rocking and nuzzling, each seeking warmth and comfort from each other; each eager to make everything right.

"Witch!" he teased. "For snarling and spitting at me like an adder." His hand slid down her back to her bottom and he slapped her lightly. "Do you know that I was invited to dine with the King and chose to come home to dine with you instead? I sought *your* company over that of a king. *He* treats me with respect. You with disdain."

"Must I watch and weigh every word I utter to you?" asked Marina sweetly, throwing his earlier remark back in his face. "Do I not have the right to express my feelings?"

"Indeed you do. Like this." Alex took her arms and placed them around his neck, then draped her legs

around him as he leaned over her. "Now your lips," he said, low, and bent his head close to hers. "Speak to me with your sweet lips and I promise I will listen. Say you love me, that you are glad to have me home."

Marina sighed . . . and kissed him, still slightly annoyed with him, but not as much as before; not nearly as much. The wonderful heat and strength of his naked body against hers was so distracting, lulling her mind while it woke up her senses. And it was hard to maintain cold anger when one's flesh was beginning to burn and tingle under caressing hands and lips that knew just how to fan the flames that would shortly consume her. Or to speak harshly to one who was at that moment whispering endearments in her ears. "There is no king on earth who could have kept me away from my Marina," Alex was saying, his voice so deep and tender that her heart melted and swelled with joy. "I love you and want you near me always . . ."

Now Marina marveled that she could ever have been angry at him. Oh, she thought, ashamed, how could she? She kissed him over and over to make it up to him, catching his face between her hands and pressing her lips to his eyes, his ears, cheeks, and chin, then feverishly crushing her mouth to his. "How lucky I am," she told him softly, tremulously, "to have such a wonderful, handsome, exciting man to warm my bed. Oh, Alex, how I love you! I missed you so much while you were away."

Now she had all his attention. This was the Marina he liked best, the one he had fallen in love with years ago in England. The Marina who held nothing back and told him exactly what was in her heart.

Alex crushed her to him, her full breasts pressed to the hardness of his chest, the bulging muscles of his thighs coaxing her legs to part, his swelling manhood

burning like a brand into her stomach, as if to mark her as his. With all the hungry passion building inside him, Alex plundered her soft, parted lips. His mouth moved over her upturned face as if tasting her, savoring her, and her skin and hair smelled of attar of roses, her breath fresh as a mountain breeze, her lips sweet as sugared wine. "Beautiful you are . . . body and soul," he told her unsteadily, his broad tanned hand on her belly, then curving to slip between her legs, fingers stroking her to rapture, his knowledge of her speaking through his fingertips.

Marina drew a long, shuddering breath. For a moment she seemed to float in a languid sea of sensation so that she felt drugged, intoxicated, her mouth, her breasts, her thighs, every inch of her strummed to ecstatic awareness as by a master hand. She could feel the cells of her body tingling, her breath quickening, pulse leaping as Alex's tongue traced the shape of her ear, then her mouth, her throat, the curve of her shoulder. Shivering, Marina plunged her fingers into his hair and avidly sought his mouth and tongue, moaning softly as pleasure intensified. Swiftly the drugged feeling gave way to an exhilarating excitement, a savage, desperate need, and she reached for him, thrilling at the fiery contact with the instrument that would bring her release, gasping, "I'll burn for love of you. Oh, my dearest love . . ."

In the dark room Marina could see the darker shape of him rising over her, hear his breath loud in the chamber, feel moisture breaking out on his body and hers at this supreme moment of anticipation. Then he thrust downwards and filled her with what she craved.

Powerfully he moved within her as Marina arched her body to be ravaged by his hungry mouth. Bliss, rapture, and unbearable desire drove everything else out of her mind as she felt his lips close over her

breast, bathing each in turn with a dewy heat, rasping her nipples until her whole body began to quiver and burn as with a raging fever. Wantonly, wildly, Marina clutched his wide shoulders and thrust herself against him, the deeper to take him in, bucking and writhing in her journey toward ecstasy. It came in a heart-stopping rush and she tried to cling to it, to hold it, to make it last forever, feeling so intense that she felt she would shatter.

When their pounding hearts slowed down, Alex chuckled, hugging her. "Well, I think you *are* glad to have me back."

"You know it well," Marina replied unsteadily.

He shoved the covers away from them. "This chamber is steamy as a jungle."

"Aye, now it is."

He turned his head to her in the darkness and, unable to see her, sat up and fumbled to light the candle.

"What are you doing?" Marina caught his arm and tried to pull him back down beside her. The moment he moved away she felt cooler,

the perspiration drying on her skin making her hot flesh prickle, destroying the warm, languid feeling that followed lovemaking.

"I would look upon you in this sweet mood," he said. "A man must seize these precious moments while he can."

She slapped him, chiding, "You are not always so sweet yourself, sir! You may not realize this, Sinclair, but you have a distinctly hard, ruthless cast to your features whenever things don't go as you wish, so you have no right to criticize me."

The candle flickered into flame, and a pool of soft, golden light illuminated the area around the bed. Alexander gazed down at her as she lay back against

the pillows, one arm flung back over her head, her thick blonde hair scattered like rippling gold silk all about her, her dark eyes sultry, mouth swollen from his passionate kisses. He looked at her breasts, firm and creamy, the nipples still turgid and plummy-red, succulent as ripe fruit. Then he drew back the rest of the covers and studied all of her avidly, as a man will when something rare and beautiful comes into his possession.

"Alexstop!" Marina laughed shakily and tried to draw up the covers, but he caught her hand and shook his head. Now his expression was grave, intent, and as his eyes moved slowly over her slender curves possessively, caressingly, Marina began to feel strangely aroused though he wasn't touching her in any way. She looked at the tanned, muscular body leaning over her, her heart leaping when she saw his maleness stir and begin to throb, pulsing with fresh desire. Marina put out her hand and touched him in wonder, amazed that Alex could be so quickly aroused but delighted and triumphant that she had been the cause of it.

He caught her hand and held it still and gazed deep in her eyes, a look that stopped her heart. Marina had the feeling that she was about to make an exciting discovery or have some mystery revealed to her.

"When a man sees before him such a goddess he must worship at her temple," Alex told her softly. Then he bent down and whispered against her parted lips, "Would you like me to worship you, Marina?"

"Whatwhat do you mean?" Half-laughing, not sure whether he was teasing her or not, she stared into eyes that were now a dark, smoldering green. There was a singularly satyrlike look about Alex at

that moment, a wicked glint in his eyes.

"I bow before you," he murmured, and lowered his head.

He swept her through a door Marina had never known existed, taking her down into an erotic world to experience a paradise such as she had never dreamed possible. Oh, the sweet torment, the pleasure, the unbearable ecstasy he was bringing her with his lips and tongue! The flaming frenzy took hold of her, lust bursting from every pore, bathing her skin in steamy dew. Desire Marina had never known herself capable of raged through her. Wild, hot blood pounded in her ears. Rational thought vanished. Only the dark and desperate craving remained.

Alexander was skilled at making it last. He knew how to drive her mad, to make her aware of her body in a way Marina never had been before, bringing her to new and rapturous heights of sensation, to the edge again and again until she was moaning, begging him for release.

Marina cried out when at last it came, sensual pleasure so strong, so powerful that it left her shuddering violently and weeping in Alexander's arms as her mind groped to understand what had happened to her. "Jesu . . ." she breathed, "I never knew . . ."

But if she was a goddess then he was a god and also deserved homage.

Hours later they sat up against the pillows watching the cool, opalescent light of dawn stealing into the room, toasting it with the wine Alex had sneaked up from the cellar. Both had a raging thirst after the heat of their amours. Marina felt deliciously wicked to be drinking so early in the morning, and giggled. "What will they say when we teeter down to breakfast?"

"They'll be green with envy."

Their eyes met, soft with love, and Alex kissed her tenderly.

"You make it hard for me to leave tomorrow," he said, sighing. "King James and his witch hunt! He

might at least dignify it by calling it what it really is, a weeding out of traitors."

Marina eyed him curiously. "Why were you chosen for the task?"

Alex had been selected, he knew, because the King was testing him, but he didn't tell Marina that, afraid of worrying her. Nor did he tell her that everywhere he went in Edinburgh, even in the outlying places, he was treated like a hero and feted and applauded, so much so that Alex found it embarrassing.

When Alex returned to Edinburgh and began his investigations, his first actions were hardly what James had hoped for. He ordered the release of the pregnant young "witch" from the dungeons, and also of the lawyer's wife, Mistress MacBride. Most of the male prisoners were also let go after Alexander examined them and ascertained that they were innocent, mere pawns arrested to assuage the King's sudden blood-lust, his desire to revenge the threat to his wife's life.

"I would not have let them go," George Gordon told Alex bluntly. "How will this look in the eyes of His Majesty? 'Twill fan a suspicion in his mind, mayhap lead him to think that you are in with them."

Alex shrugged. "Better that than having the poor wretches burned at the stake, as others were before them. I have no mind to live with a sore conscience for the rest of my days."

Gordon laughed grimly. "Those days could be short if James has reason to doubt your loyalty. To have to wrestle with a sore conscience is preferable, methinks, to going to the block."

King James did not hide his displeasure when Chancellor Maitland informed him that his dungeons were now almost empty. He sent for Alexander and

demanded an explanation, this in front of Maitland, Lennox, Robert Bruce, and some of his other favorites. Bothwell, though no longer a favorite, was also there standing apart from the others on the opposite side of the room.

"A marvelous turn of events," said the King. "Scotland is a country without any criminals!"

There were a few titters, though Maitland of Thirlestane's long, sober face did not crack in a smile. The King's chancellor had a serious, somewhat pedantic disposition. He was an able man, hard-working and intelligent, and had a faintly contemptuous attitude toward some of the others surrounding the monarch, an attitude he couldn't quite concealor didn't bother to conceal. Powerful as he was, Maitland had naturally made many enemies, including Earl Bothwell. But though he

sometimes vexed the King with his sobriety. James liked people about him with a keen wit. He recognized that he had a rare and excellent servant in Maitland of Thirlestane. But the young, golden-haired Duke of Lennox, son of the man who had been the King's premier favorite while he lived, laughed openly. "Would that it were so, but alas, much as we might wish it, this land of ours is no paradise." He was girlishly pretty and fluttered his long lashes at the tall, black-haired nobleman from the wilds of the Highlands, whose expression and manner were now as forbidding as the land he came from. "God's soul, Sinclair, why did you let these fiends go to ply their evil with renewed vigor, given a nod of approval?"

"They are no more evil than you are, Lennox," Alexander interrupted curtly, leaving them to make of the remark what they would.

Lennox's fair skin flushed crimson and his eyes jumped to the King, expecting him to order Sinclair's

arrestor at the very least chastise him for insulting the heir to the throne. But James sat stroking his beard, his heavy-lidded eyes half-closed, his attention not on his heir but on Sinclair's hand as it rested almost casually on the hilt of his sword. There was no sarcasm in his voice when he inquired quietly, "Why did you let the prisoners go, my lord?"

Alex threw a look around the chamber at the others, his green eyes cold as ice as they lingered for a moment on Bothwell; then, dismissing him contemptuously, he fixed his attention on the King. "Only one of them was in any way suspicious. The rest had simply been caught in the net presently sweeping the land, seized by overzealous agents who had no desire to return to Your Majesty empty-handed."

"But, Sinclair" James leaned forward in his seat "some of these people confessed to their guilt!"

Alex laughed grimly. "Who would not confess under torture? Few have the strength and courage to resist the persuasion of the rack, or the Brakes."

"The innocent are given that strength by the Almighty," said the pious Robert Bruce. "Did you, for instance, confess while in the Tower?"

"He was never racked," muttered the Earl of Bothwell, his remark significant.

Alexander's fingers closed like iron bars over the hilt of his sword and his jaw clenched as he struggled to control his anger, all his instincts clamoring to challenge the man who had hinted that he was a Judas. Sensing his mood, and blanching at the thought of a bloody duel taking place in his chamber, James's hand shot up, the signal that no one should interrupt.

"A moment ago you said that all but one of the prisoners were free of suspicion. Name the suspect, Sinclair, and tell me why you let him go."

Again Alexander's eyes scanned the room. "I would

prefer to do so in private, Your Grace."

For a moment there wasn't a sound, but the eight men in the room were now eying each other uneasily, all except Bothwell, who cried, "Youyou insolent swine! Are you questioning our fealty? Have you forgotten that you are in the presence of the King and his family? Dog!" He sprang forward, pulling a dagger out of his belt, his eyes glittering and florid color blotching his narrow face. While the King reeled back in his chair and Maitland flew to the door shouting for the guards, Alexander stood ten feet away, his legs spread, automatically balancing his body for the attack, his hand poised above his sword that was still in its scabbard. He smiled, and that smile was chilling. "You have crude instincts for a nobleman, Bothwell," he said, his voice deadly calm. "And a mouth as foul as your mind. Step hither and I promise you this, the King will have one less member of his family to worry about."

Crouching, Bothwell feinted back and forth in front of Alexander, his dagger in his hand, but the expression on his face was no longer menacing; the horrified onlookers noticed that he had gone quite pale, and he made no move to bridge the distance between himself and Sinclair. He seemed almost relieved when the guards rushed in and seized him.

Thereupon the King ordered that the room be cleared, except for Maitland and Alexander, and finally James greatly subdued they got down to business. Alex named the suspect, one Edward Cochrane, a tailor who lived in the region of North Berwick, a coastal area some twenty miles from the capital. The man himself was of low station, but he had important people among his clients, including several members of the nobility. The tailor had some unusual hobbies; he was a

hypnotist, cast horoscopes,

and could be found roaming about at night ostensibly studying the stars. Some of the villagers where he lived were afraid of him, and the local butcher had testified that Cochrane drank the blood of an ox every day "to keep up his strength"; another informer whispered that he was a vampire with inhuman powers.

The tailor had been arrested before Alexander had been put in charge of the investigation, and he was the only one of the suspects not to break under torture. The most the interrogators had got out of him, even on the rack, were the three words "I durst not . . ."

"He is hiding something, or someone," Alexander told the King, "but was quite prepared to go to his death rather than reveal his secrets."

James burst out, "Then why in Christ's name did you set him free?"

" 'Twould avail us nothing to keep the man in prison," Alex responded somewhat impatiently, "nor to execute him. And his freedom is only an illusion. Every move he makes is being watched. Hopefully, he will lead us to others."

"Aye, I see." James nodded.

"It could be nothing," Alex went on, "just mere fools dabbling in the occult, imbuing themselves with powers they don't really possess to frighten their neighbors or for gain. We shall see."

The King looked at Maitland, excitement in his eyes.

"Well," he said, "what say you, Chancellor?"

"Aye . . . a plan worth pursuing," the older man replied carefully. He didn't believe in witchcraft any more than Alex did, but of course this wasn't a witch hunt; it was a search to flush out those engaged in treachery against the King, and there were always plenty of those in any kingdom. But surprisingly

enough, there had been few really serious plots against James (the infamous Raid of Ruthven when the monarch was only sixteen by far the most grave), thanks to his ever-vigilant ministers, Maitland liked to think. Which was not to say there weren't those about him with dangerous ambitions, who might well be biding their time until the

climate was more propitious for the success of their schemes. Danger was always present for a sovereign who had no children to inherit his throne. This led to various claimants to the succession, not all of them legitimate. Lennox was recognized by some as the heir, and the King himself favored him, but the Hamiltons too had a legitimate claim though there were many who would have strenuously opposed either of these men succeeding.

Maitland could sense that the situation was coming to a head. King James had recently married. In all likelihood, children would be born from the union. Once that happened, the present claimants would have to stand aside, their chance of succeeding gone. Now was the time to strike. Which of them, Maitland wondered, would try? Like Alex, the chancellor was convinced that there was a worm near the core of the apple, and it was for this reason that he was having the Lennox and Hamilton factions watched. He also had a question about the Earl of Huntly, the most powerful Catholic nobleman in Scotland. Though the King was fond of George Gordon, Gordon like his grandfather before him always served his own interests first.

Unlike many of the others surrounding the King, Maitland never spoke or acted without careful deliberation, weighing up all the pros and cons. As he listened to Alexander making his report to James, he remembered that the Sinclairs were allies of the

Gordons, yet for all that he was inclined to trust Alexander Sinclair at least, greatly admiring him for trying to rescue Queen Mary, but he thought less of his brother, David. David and Earl Bothwell were very close, and Bothwell hated Maitland and took every opportunity to discredit him in the eyes of the King. Now he was striving to discredit Alexander even though he was friends with his brother. It had come to the chancellor's alert ears that all was not well between the Sinclair brothers, and it wasn't hard to see why. There too the problem was the succession, in this case to the future chieftainship of the clan Sinclair.

The King was saying, "This potheer between you and Bothwell must cease, Alexander. He will be banished from court for a while for daring to draw his weapon in my presence, as would you have been had you unsheathed your sword. If I hear tell of either of you trying to harm the other, the guilty party will be arrested and dealt with most severely. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly." Alexander's voice was steely cold, but the look of restrained violence in his eyes unnerved James, who sat back in his

chair, frowning. "I trust, however, that I have the right to defend myself if Bothwell should try to attack, as he did a few minutes ago?" said Sinclair, the faint mockery in his voice making it clear that he would defend himself whether or not the King gave him leave.

"Ah . . . Alex, lad" James sighed and shook his head "don't make things more awkward than they need be. Expend your energies in routing the traitors from my realm and you'll benefit from it more than you will from seeking revenge on my foolish cousin."

Maitland's eyes went to the medallion around Sinclair's neck, which Alex dutifully wore in the

monarch's presence, and he dropped his eyes hastily, feeling embarrassed. It prompted him to do something uncharacteristic when he saw Alex out of the chamber, for Maitland was a man who was careful never to take sides.

"Steer clear of Bothwell, for he's out to do you mischief," he warned as they stood for a moment in the corridor. Then almost as an aside, "And caution your brother against his society. 'Twill bring him naught but grief."

But when Alex tried to warn David it led to a violent quarrel between them. His brother angrily defended his friend Francis Stewart. "Bothwell is a brave man and fine soldier with the courage to speak his mind, and it shames the King to have one of his own blood make him look inferior"

"Inferior!" Alex laughed scornfully. "The King is worth ten of his cousin. Bothwell is a vainglorious bully with a dangerously erratic streak in his nature, and treacherous to friend and foe alike"

"Kindly refrain from trying to foist your advice on me, brother," David interrupted haughtily. "I will associate with whom I please."

At the end of November, while Alex was away in Edinburgh, Marina received a letter from Gwen Porter, written for her by a cousin who could read and write. She warned Marina that Stafford had left for Scotland, determined to bring her and the child back. "We have heard through channels that he has gone a little mad and vows to find you or die in the attempt. Take care, sweeting, for Edgar can be persistent

and cunning as a wolf when his mind is set on something. And don't let little Clare out of your sight."

Gwen also had another piece of news for her. Maud Percy was ill with some sort of lingering disease. "We have heard that she has been making enquiries about you. Do you wish us to tell her where you are so that she can reach you? Write back and let me know."

Since Alex was away, Marina went with her news about Stafford to the chief. Blake laughed grimly. "The fellow is a fool to think of coming here. Me-

thinks his obstinacy will be the end of him. Even assuming that he reaches the Highlands alive, he will never take you out of here, that I promise you."

It was arranged that Marina should never leave Augusta without a heavily armed guard; also, the Sinclair sentries were alerted to watch for strangers and apprehend them before they got anywhere near the castle.

Sensing Marina's terror, Blake said, "Fear not, for he will never get near you. I marvel that he would even try. This only serves to point up that the man's mind has become unhinged; even his sense of self-preservation has deserted him." He squeezed her hand, advising, "Go on as usual and don't allow the knave to trouble you; refuse him even that small victory."

"I'll try," Marina replied shakily.

But *she* knew her husband better than any of them and though she tried not to show it, Marina was frightened, so much so that she stayed close to the castle and, as Gwen had suggested, never let her daughter out of her sight. Even walking in the gardens and it was necessary, especially for Clare, to have exercise in the fresh air Marina was nervous, jumping violently at the slightest sound and rushing back into the castle when anyone approached. The thought of Edgar managing to grab her and the child and forcing them back with him to dismal Baxton Hall made her ill. She knew too that this time he would keep them both close prisoners; perhaps he would even kill her as it was whispered he had done to his previous wives! With that thought in mind, Marina took to always wearing boots rather than slippers, and inside a boot was a dagger. Aye, she determined, I will kill him, or myself, before I will let him take us. Oh, God, to think of never seeing Alex again! Somehow she knew that if Edgar succeeded this

time in return-

ing her to England, he would make very certain that Alexander Sinclair never set eyes on her again.

The autumn dragged on and the first snows of early winter arrived. Standing at her chamber window, gazing over the bleak mountains and moorland, Marina would ask herself, "Where is he? Can he be on his way to the castle now, perhaps disguised as a monk, or a peddler, or even a Highlander in borrowed plaids?" With the fanatically determined Edgar, anything was possible. As Blake had said, he was more than a little mad. Getting his wife and Clare back had become a sick obsession with him.

So concerned was Marina about the possible appearance of her husband that she gave little thought to Gwen's news about Maud Percy. Maud was the least of her worries at that time. The woman had been an indifferent mother to her own children while they were growing up and had shown even less interest in her ward. Then to cruelly wed her to a beast like Stafford!

Marina wrote back to Gwen saying, "Tell Lady Percy nothing. Not a hint about where I am. I have no desire for any sort of contact with the woman, nor her husband either. I would as soon forget that part of my life."

The Sinclair family moved to spend Christmas and New Year's at Cumbray Castle, the seat of the clan MacKellar. As chief of the clan, Alyssa spent every other holiday season among her own people, also several months of the year in between. Cumbray Castle was almost as grand as Augusta, and in their way the tall, red-haired MacKellars were almost as impressive as the Sinclairs. The moment they laid eyes on Clare they cried, "This one is ours through and through!" And with a glance of triumph at Lord Blake and Alexander, who came back from Edinburgh

for the festivities, Stephan MacKellar said, "The stamp of our blood has won out here, eh, my lords?"

Both Blake and his son had to concede that it had indeed. The two clans had been enemies in the distant past and it had been Blake himself who had been instrumental in bringing them together, this before Alyssa was able to claim her birthright. Now the clans were closely united, so close they were able to make teasing references to

their long feud, of which all that lingered was a friendly rivalry between them. "Our next will have the stamp of the Sinclairs," Alex prophesied, and Marina blushed furiously when all eyes turned toward her questioningly.

"Aye," she nodded, reaching for Alexander's hand. "Clare, if all goes well, will have a brother or sister next July."

The announcement led to an immediate celebration, and Marina was relieved and heartened at how well they received the news, considering the fact that they were not married, that she was still locked into the role of Alexander's mistress. She had suspected her pregnancy for the past month. Alex himself had only heard about it two days before when he came to Cumbray Castle from Edinburgh. After hugging her fiercely, he had burst out in exasperation, "You must be got free of Stafford before this one is born! Christ's teeth, if I were not saddled with this commission of the King's I would go south myself and settle with the rogue once and for all. I would find him," he said grimly, "wherever he is."

That was one time when Marina was glad that Alexander *was* so occupied in the capital, because if these two men were to meet she was certain that Alex would not hesitate to kill her husband when Edgar refused to give her a divorce as he most certainly would not.

But Marina felt better at Cumbray, believing that Stafford would never think to look for her here. Alex was with her, which always gave her a wonderful sense of security, and with the might of the two clans around them she felt that she had little to worry about. She allowed her happiness to break through and overwhelm her fear, and the holiday season was a joyous one, the entertainment boisterous and gay, the dancing lively, the food sumptuous. Here were a host of new people to get to know Stephan and Sarah MacKellar, the elderly Lord Luke and Nan, a sweet couple and the uncle and aunt of the chief, also cousins Fiona, Mathew, Anne, and Ian and countless others, all the MacKellar side of the family. Most treated Alexander's English mistress politely and in some cases even affectionately, but when they all met for the Yuletide Ball, there were a few who sniffed their disapproval. As she had at Castle Augusta, Marina steeled herself to ignore them. I am happy, she thought, blissfully happy with my lord and living among these Highlanders and I will not allow those few to spoil it but please, God, let Edgar never find me now, not with another little Sinclair in my belly!

Alex told her that he was sending six of his men south in search of Stafford, to investigate and report back what was happening.

At the castle there was much talk about the situation in Edinburgh where Stephan MacKellar too spent much of his time. They were curious about Alexander's job and his success with the witch hunt of which he dared tell them little. They also examined his medallion, expressing mixed feelings about the reward. "Meager gratitude for a mighty deed," snorted elderly Lord Luke. "Had you done something of like magnitude for the King's *mother*, she would have shown the world how she honored valor and

not with trinkets and baubles, bigod!"

Stephan, a member of the Privy Council, murmured, "James does naught without lengthy deliberation"

"What need for deliberation?" scoffed David. "Even the common people know my brother was treated shabbily. Others have been given far more for far less." He glanced at Alex, who was grinning at the heated exchange and seemed not in the least put out. "Cock's bones, Esmé Lennox was handed half the kingdom for writing love sonnets to the King!"

"Mayhap I should take up poetry," Alex chuckled.

When the men discussed politics and the various power struggles going on at court, the women chatted about the latest fashions, the new innovations the young Queen had brought over with her from Denmark. She had come to her husband's capital city in a silver coach pulled by eight fine white horses. She wore a wider, fan-shaped ruff, rapidly being copied all over the nation. Only fifteen years old, she had already the reputation of being a great beauty with her round, guileless eyes and hip-long flaxen hair. Listening to this description, old Nan MacKellar sighed dreamily, "Ah, how weak with love the King must be for his lady."

"At least this time it is a lady!" laughed the outspoken Fiona.

There was a sudden embarrassed silence wherein old Nan gazed at the red faces around her, uncomprehending. "What do you mean, Fiona, lass?" she said at length.

Glancing at the others, who shook their heads in warning, Fiona replied obliquely, "Oh, the King has many to claim his love. 'Tis nice

to find it now fixed on this one woman instead of, ah . . . scattered about."

The elderly woman nodded. "Our James is a virtuous lad, none can deny it. You'll find no bastards clinging about *his* royal robes as happened with all of his ancestors, save his own lady mother."

None of them dared look at each other for fear of laughing.

Heavy snow fell in the mountains. Fierce storms raged that obliterated everything in a sea of swirling white, leaving Cumbray Castle isolated and totally cut off from the rest of the world, a situation Marina welcomed. It meant that Edgar Stafford could not reach her, however hard he tried. It also meant that Alexander could not return to Edinburgh while the storms lasted and the tracks through the glens were completely blocked. Inside the castle all was warm and convivial, with fires roaring in every chamber, plenty of food and wine to sustain them, and pleasant company with whom to while away the long winter days and nights.

From the start Marina's second pregnancy was different. She was only sick once, nor did she feel listless and tired, as she had done with Clare. Her cheeks glowed and her eyes shone and she felt fit and energetic.

"'Twill be a lad this time," Alex predicted, examining her fondly, adding, "If I am still in Edinburgh when the time comes, I shall bring you to Clairmont, our city residence, for this time I would be at your side when our child is born. By then too, pray God, you will be my wife."

When after ten days of storms the wind died down and a tepid sun peeped through the clouds, little Clare pleaded to be allowed out to play in the snow. Marina took her out to the south lawn, the one close to the side entrance to the castle, when David Sinclair saw

them from a downstairs window. He hurried out to join them and suggested that all three build a snowman.

"Aye, Uncle Davy!" cried Clare, hugging his long legs. "But we no' have a hat to put on him."

"Right!" he laughed. "That will soon be rectified. Wait here, ladies, while I fetch the proper attire for our white gentleman."

With much laughter and a great deal of snowball throwing, their creation was finally finished all except for his requisite garb. David held his niece up to place the hat on his head and carefully drape the scarf around his neck, the little gift squealing, "Och, is he no' braw?" her diction now heavily tinged with the Scottish twang. "Want to show nanny," she cried, wriggling to get down. Seizing her uncle's hand, Clare tugged him over to the heavy door. "Open it for me, Uncle? I bring nanny out to see him."

"Clare, say please," Marina chided. "Remember your manners."

David walked back to her, grinning. "She's a grand wee lass, the very picture of my lady mother. The MacKellars are much delighted with her because of it." He added half-jokingly, "We must take care that they don't lure her affections away. I think they gave her more toys than we did for Christmas, if that's possible."

"They are lovely people," Marina said, meaning it, but careful to add, "as are the Sinclairs."

David gave her a penetrating sidelong glance, noting her rosy cheeks and the shine in her eyes, the smile playing about her mouth. "Then you like the Highlands?"

She nodded. "And especially the people. Most of them are so open, warm, and friendly." She laughed. "I must confess that I had my doubts about coming

here, not sure of my reception, but it has surpassed my wildest dreams. What a dear family you have, David. I can appreciate them, never having had a family of my own. You have something wonderfully precious."

"Aye, I know," he responded quietly.

Clare appeared with her nurse and proudly showed off their creation.

"Walk with me a bit," David invited after the other two had gone back into the house. "I think 'tis time that you and I got to know each other better."

They strolled down a path that had been shoveled clear of snow, he in a long gray cloak and Marina in a heavy mantle of blue velvet trimmed with miniver, a loose hood pulled up over her head. She wasn't sure what to expect and, as they walked along in silence for a

little while, felt a touch of tension. David had always been polite, but definitely reserved and slightly aloof, though from the first he had been good with Clare.

When they reached the back of the castle he said, "Doubtless you think I'm an unnatural brother?"

Marina swung on him, startled. "Nay! What . . . do you mean?"

He sighed, kicking at the piles of snow lining the path, his eyes roving the terrain. "You should know that I too appreciate my family. Sinclairs always stand behind their own, and I am no exception. But . . . one can defend them while not always agreeing with them. Alex and I see things very differently."

Marina didn't know what to say and judiciously kept silent.

He stopped and caught her arm, halting her. "Bothwell meant no disrespect to you at the Harvest Ball. 'Tis his way to be, ah . . . effusive." His handsome face tightened as he went on, " 'Twas insulting the way Alex made such an issue of it at our harvest celebrations, demeaning a guest in our home. Then he makes

matters worse by casting a slur against Bothwell's loyalty in front of the King!" David's skin flushed with anger. "Under the circumstances, can you blame Bothwell for seeking satisfaction? Perhaps it was rash of him to do so in His Majesty's presence, but a man greatly offended does not always pause to think." He scowled. "My brother should have a care. Francis Stewart has a high position and great power. How will it benefit the Sinclairs if he makes an enemy of such a man?"

Marina stared at him in dismay and perplexity, much of what David had just told her news indeed. "When . . . when did Alex cast a slur against him?"

"At court some weeks gone." His brown eyes roved her face. "You did not know about this?"

Marina shook her head.

David explained what had happened, how close they had come to doing battle with the King and his courtiers as witnesses, and how Bothwell had been banished for it and was now completely out of favor with James and cooling his heels at his estate in Liddesdale. Alex, on the other hand, had not been punished at all.

"Naturally, Bothwell is livid at the injustice of it all, and that does not bode well for Alex," David finished darkly.

Marina was shocked and alarmed, but she wasn't surprised that Alex had not told her. He went out of his way to spare her worry.

"You can see the awkward position this places me in," David went on. "Alex is my brother, Bothwell my closest friend. Now the pair of them are enemies!" He looked down at her intently. "I don't snipe at Alex out of mere contrariness," he insisted. "He has gone out of his way to break up my friendship with a man I

admire; a man who has always been most congenial and well-meaning toward me."

Marina remembered Bothwell's behavior toward her on the night of the Harvest Ball when both his manner and the words he had said were lewd and insinuating, so much so that they had attracted the attention of others. Alex, without a word to the King's cousin, had simply taken her away from him when he'd had every right to subject him to the thrashing he deserved. Also, if Alex had questioned his fealty, then, Marina was convinced, he must have had good reason to do so. From what she had heard about Francis Stewart since, the man was far from trustworthy and might well have an ulterior motive for befriending David, who would one day be the chief of a powerful clan and the ally of others, like the Gordons, who were even more powerful. A useful friend to have indeed!

"Alex must apologize to Francis," David blurted.

Marina's eyes widened indignantly at the remark. Never! she almost cried. Why should he belittle himself to a man he despises? But she bit the words back just in time. David, she was fast understanding, was young and inexperienced and still woefully lacking in a clear assessment of character or the behavior that motivated others. Somewhat naïve and idealistic, he tended to take people at face value. Bothwell had gone out of his way to curry his favor, and young as he was, new to life at court, David was flattered to have the friendship of such a powerful nobleman close to the King himself.

David pressed, "If all goes as planned, some day you and Alex will marry, so it would be to your advantage to urge him to set things right with Bothwell."

Marina could hardly control her anger. "David,"

she said, fighting for composure, "I would not presume to tell Alexander what to do. I know next to nothing about the situation in Edinburgh."

"But I just explained," he retorted impatiently. His fingers tightened on her arm. "Can you not understand that I am trying to avert a crisis? Since my brother won't be reasoned with, I thought to turn to you. 'Tis obvious that you can influence him as no other can."

Marina took several deep gulps of the cold afternoon air to steady herself, then faced him squarely. "Have you ever stopped to consider that your brother might be right and this association with Lord Bothwell detrimental to you?" she asked him bluntly.

His head rose haughtily. "I see that you *have* discussed this with Alex."

"Have you, David?" She went on quietly when he said nothing, "Stewart has good reason to want to form a connection with the future chief of the clan Sinclair, one closely allied to the Gordons. He is an ambitious man, is he not, a man who craves power, some say even the Crown itself! What better way to try to seize it than by having the might of the clans behind him? I am only a lass from England, one unfamiliar with the power struggles going on herebut even I can see how Bothwell might use you to his advantage. I would think about it," she urged, then turned and walked away from him and disappeared back inside the castle, leaving David Sinclair staring after her, a frown on his face.

When she told Alex about her talk with his brother once they were alone in their own room that night, he was all for barging down the corridor to confront David and whip some sense into him, furious that his brother would have informed Marina of his confron-

tation with Bothwell at court.

"Nay, leave him be," she said. "You can lead a horse to water, but not force it to drink. Now, what happened at court between you and Earl Bothwell?"

Alex's version of the incident was markedly different from the one Stewart had related to David. "I was hesitant about revealing the name of the suspect for security reasons," he explained. "There were eight men in that room at the time, and as history has proved, most with a mind to depose a monarch are from the ranks of the aristocracy. I

merely stated that I would prefer to name the suspect in private. Bothwell was the only one who took offense. He, not I, drew his weapon and made to attack, hence the reason the King banished him."

"Then David had the wrong way of it . . ."

Marina looked up into his face as she lay in his arms. "Would that this job of yours be finished in Edinburgh! How pleasant it will be to live in peace in the Highlands, far away from the intrigues at court."

Alex kissed her, then smiled. "From what I've heard, those were oft the very words my mother said to my father at the time he was in the service of Mary Stuart."

"I can well understand how she must have felt!"

"Then I'll make you a promise. When this work is done, I shall refuse all other commissions and become a country squire managing Cumbray."

Marina threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Alexander and David returned to Edinburgh in mid-January, and at the beginning of February the Sinclair family and Marina made their way back to Castle Augusta. There was a startling letter awaiting

Marina from Gwen Porter.

Baxton Hall had been sacked and almost burned to the ground! Edgar Stafford had never returned from his trip to Scotland, and the men he had left in charge of his Hall had all disappeared. "The feeling is that the men Edgar took with him into Scotland were in cahoots with those he left behind to guard his manor; that the former murdered Edgar somewhere in the wilds, slipped back into England in the dead of night to plunder Baxton Hall and make off with what they could before setting it aflame," Gwen wrote through her cousin. "There's a warrant out for Lester Fordyce, thought to be the ringleader. The sheriff and his posse are searching for him now, also the rest involved, but the feeling is that Edgar is dead."

There was also more about Lady Maud Percy, who was now gravely ill. "Imagine our surprise," the letter continued, "when Sir Guy himself rode down to Brokenbridge Farm to speak to us. His lady, he said, has not long to live and has certain things she would like to tell you." Gwen added cynically, "Doubtless the woman wants to meet her

maker with a clear conscience and would like to make peace with you. Shall I tell them where you can be reached? I await your instructions."

But all Marina could think of was that she might be free! Free to wed Alex at last! She felt such a surge of excitement that the letter fluttered out of her hands and she jumped up and began to pace feverishly around the room. "Oh, if only Alex were here!" she cried, desperate to tell him her news. As for Maud Percy . . . Marina would send word through Gwen that she held no grudge against her which wasn't quite true! but she had absolutely no desire to bring her former guardians back into her life, considering

all they had done to her. The past, as far as she was concerned, was dead, and she wanted nothing to taint her future.

She flew down the stairs to tell the Earl and Countess of Belrose her wonderful news. Then she would write to Alexander.

28

The Queen of England was in a pensive mood. She was confined to her apartments with a cold, and sickness always depressed her. Her head throbbed, her bones ached, and a sore throat prevented her from engaging in idle chatter with her ladies-in-waiting, which would at least have helped to pass the time. Even reading tired her.

There was a time when minor illness like this would hardly have bothered her; when she would have refused to knuckle under and gone on with her life as usual, throwing herself into the daily business with her ministers, seeing representatives from other lands, and at the end of her active day still energetic enough to cavort and frolic with her courtiers. Those about her had marveled at her stamina. Now they were whispering, "The Queen is growing old."

And it was true! Sitting before her mirror, gazing at herself in the glass, was no longer a pleasurable

experience. Elizabeth had always known she was not a beautiful woman not like her cousin, Mary Stuart. Of course her courtiers had strenuously denied that, and in a surface part of her mind Elizabeth had allowed them to convince her that she was wondrous fair, even while knowing the truth at some deeper level that she rarely cared to delve into. But she had been handsome! She'd had the Tudor hair, that

rich shade of reddish-gold, and fine white skin, hardly marred by her bouts with smallpox, and clear amber eyes that had shone with a lively interest in everything about her.

So when regally clad in her sumptuous gowns designed to emphasize her slender figure, and glittering with precious gems, she had been truly magnificent, a dazzling personage indeed. All that together with her quick, intelligent mind and her ready wit had drawn others to her like moths buzzing about a flame.

Oh, the suitors she had had! The princes and dukes and even kings who had desperately sought her handall destined to be disappointed in the end. What a rare and satisfying game it had been to keep them dangling, pitting one against the other, sometimes for years. But she had never seriously considered any of them. Only one man claimed her heart, and always had, the handsome Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley.

She had even considered marrying him! Her peopleand she had always made it her policy to bow to the wishes of her subjectshad decreed otherwise.

Ah . . . she thought, dearest, sweetest Robert. He had been a true lover, so good to look upon, so dynamic and exciting to be with, so stimulating in all ways. But also, so it seemed, ruthless, wildly ambitious, vindictive with those who opposed him, even cruelthough never with her. Elizabeth brooded about Amy Robsart, his superfluous wife, quickly

gotten out of the way. Had Robert been the means of bringing about her death as so many had whispered at the time? She would never know, nor indeed, wanted to know.

And there had been other things . . . things she was glad to shunt to the back of her mind. That had been easier to do while Dudley was alive; when her life had been too full, too crammed with constant excitement to waste the precious moments in dour soul-searching.

Now, with a dismal mood upon her, the Queen opened a locked drawer that held all her treasured mementoesthe countless gifts from Robert, not all of them costly, but dear to her just the same. These included letters and poetry he had written to her while they were apart, and which she had read over and over again. Then there were silly little things but imbued with special meaning for both of them a pretty bottle containing the special perfume he had had concocted for

her in France, now empty but the fragrance lingering on like a breath from the past. A single glove, glittering with aglets. Its partner she had lost while dallying with Robert on a terrace during a ball; she had taken it off to stroke his cheek, craving the touch of his skin against hers. Then there was a bejeweled ostrich featherhow he had loved it when she seductively tickled him with that! And a satin slipper, of all things! She had once thrown it at him during a spat, but oh, the joy of making up.

The Queen's heart throbbed painfully as her fingers touched her memoriesan old program of a play, a cameo with Dudley's likeness inside, a ring he had once worn in the early days, a lock of his curly black hair inside a locket . . . so many memories. "Oh, my love . . . !" she breathed, the tears falling silently.

They had hurt others. Aye, they had, and sometimes carelessly, at other times because there was no help for it. A Queen was no common mortal. The one who held her heart must needs be uncommon too, set above the laws that governed the masses, but because of it oft required to make painful sacrifices not demanded of those of lower station. The Queen always came before the woman, the country before her personal desires, the Crown the substitute for the joy of living with a husband and children in a normal relationship that other women took for granted. No oneeverwould call her mother . . .

For a moment Elizabeth seemed to hear voices from the pastor her conscience. She was reminded that she was growing old, frail, tired, nearing her day of reckoning. Then she would account to a greater Sovereign than any here on earth. "Elizabeth Tudor," she could imagine Him saying to her, "you have been a great Queenbut a poor upholder of womanly instincts."

Elizabeth gave a start and shook her head, uneasy at the way her mind was wandering, carrying her down pathways where she was reluctant to tread and leading her in the direction of forgotten obligations. She rummaged in the drawer, suddenly wondering who she would leave these precious possessions to when she diedwhich would not be for a long time yet! she assured herself. Certain people came into her mind, people she had been careless about rewarding, or had long neglected. Each of these people deserved something, she thought; something that had been a part of her. Aye, and perhaps she would not wait until she died. Doubtless she could spare a few items nownow while she was still alive and could make sure the recipients showed the proper appreciation!

The Queen felt happier then. She had an important task to do.

In March, when the delicate paintbrush of spring was just beginning to touch the land with soft green and yellow and daubs of mauve and pink, Marina joined Alexander in Edinburgh, leaving Clare behind with her grandparents in the Highlands. Alexander boldly ensconced his mistress in Clairmont, the Sinclair mansion in the capital. His job claimed much of his time and he found it difficult to make the long trip back to Augusta as often as he would have liked, but short breaks were sometimes possible and those he wanted to enjoy with the woman he loved.

There was still no definite news about Edgar Stafford. Alex had dispatched even more men south to investigate, impatient to learn whether Stafford was alive or dead. In England there was a warrant out for the arrest of Lester Fordyce, Stafford's squire, and the rest of his men. Marina knew that she could count on Gwen Porter to keep her well informed from that direction.

She felt happy and relaxed with the threat of Edgar no longer hovering over her, and was delighted to be closer to Alexander in Edinburgh. True, he was not always home every night and was sometimes gone for days at a time, but she saw far more of him than she had in the Highlands. Besides, there was plenty to do in the city to pass the time, and Alex had engaged a personal maid to accompany her everywhere, a genteel woman of thirty-two who had worked in noble households before and seemed to know everybody in Edinburgh. Sissy Kenrick was a veritable treasure trove of information and gossip, and proud of the fact that her sister Jean was a tiring woman at court under the ladies of the bedchamber to the new Queen Anne.

"The Queen is most comely," she said, "but much in want of brains. One must wonder how long she can hope to hold the King's interest though, hopefully, long enough for them to beget an heir! I fear that once that is accomplished he will soon return to his more stimulating companions. Even queens," she went on, "are mere vassals for fulfilling the ambitions of their lords."

"Not Queen Elizabeth," said Marina.

"Ha! Now there is a woman!"

Marina blinked in surprise. "You admire her?" In some ways she did

herself, though she could never forgive the Queen for sending Walsingham's agent to hound her, and more especially for keeping Alexander a prisoner in the Tower for so long.

Sissy Kenrick, a plain woman with sharp features and an angular frame, a woman who had never married nor desired to be "in the yoke of another," nodded her head emphatically. "She is splendid! Had Mary Stuart been wiser she could have learned valuable lessons from her English cousin. Instead, she fell for the ploys of scheming men, but then *she* was ruled by her emotions."

Marina had many an interesting conversation with her maid. Sometimes she wondered what Sissy thought of her "living in sin" with Alexander, all too obviously ruled by her own emotions and glad of it! But then she had been luckier than Queen Mary in selecting a worthy recipient for her love.

On Sundays her maid had the day off. This she spent with her sister, and usually returned to Clairmont in the evening with many juicy tidbits of gossip, some of it deliciously shocking.

"If she talks about others, then she must be gossiping about us behind our backs," Marina said to Alex soon after they hired the woman. "She will be filling

their ears and it will be passed on."

He grinned and shrugged. "All servants talk about their masters and mistresses; there's no way to muzzle them. But just take care not to tell her anything of real importance. She amuses you, does she not, and keeps you company when I'm away?"

The two women went out a lot now that the weather was better, shopping, to plays and the museum, and sightseeing around the royal city. Often they spied dignitaries and people of importance, and though she didn't know them personally, Sissy almost always knew who they were and sometimes their history as well. Often they strolled the streets, stopping to watch dancing, juggling, and other impromptu entertainments. Edinburgh was a constant panoply of changing scene and color, and never dull.

One late afternoon they were in the lawn market when Marina, waiting for her maid to make a purchase, glanced around and spotted the Earl of Bothwell standing at a nearby stall. When their eyes met he showed no surprise at seeing her in the city, which told Marina that

he already knew she had moved to Edinburgh, probably through David. He bent his head slightly in a mocking little bow, then raised his head and smiled at her.

That smile disturbed Marina. There was no warmth in it at all.

She nodded curtly, and when Sissy came back with her package, hurried off with her maid without looking at him again, but she could feel his eyes following her and they made her feel naked and somehow defiled, just from having touched her.

Sometimes the two women had the mansion all to themselves, but at other times it bustled with Sinclairs. When David, his cousin Jay, and uncle Jason Sinclair arrived a few days later, Marina re-

marked to David, "I saw your friend Bothwell in the lawnmarket on Wednesday. I thought he had been banished?"

"Aye, from court, but not from Edinburgh itself."

When after the evening meal the others went out, David took the opportunity to speak to Marina alone. "You are wrong about Francis," he insisted. "He would like the opportunity of apologizing to you for the, eh . . . misunderstanding. Why won't you give him that chance?"

"David, 'tis not necessary for him to apologize," Marina replied impatiently, weary of the subject, and knowing that nothing he could say about Bothwell would make her change her opinion about the nobleman. "I'm sorry, but I don't like him. And"

"You don't *know* him!" he retorted hotly. " 'Tis unjust to form an opinion of a person you have only met once. This hostility of yours and Alex's" he waved his arm "is putting a strain on my friendship with Francis." He glowered at her, warning, "You would do well to change your attitude, for your own sake if not for mine."

"What . . . do you mean?"

He walked to the window and stood with his back to her, giving himself a moment or two to calm down. David had been so sure he could influence his brother through his mistress, a woman who certainly had a powerful hold over Alex, one that had lasted for years. He felt strongly that this feud with Bothwell must be settled before others of his clan were drawn into it, and that as the future chief it was his duty to try to patch things up and act as the intermediary, if

necessary. The Earl of Bothwell was a very important man, one with great power and influence and related to the King! Though presently out of favor, he was certain to be quickly reinstated. What good would it

do to the ambitions of the Sinclairs to make an enemy of such a man? None! David was confident that the quarrel could be settled if the people involved would only sit down and iron out their differences. Since Alex never would, it might be possible to reach him through Marina.

David turned to her and asked bluntly, "Would you meet Bothwell if I arranged it?"

"Never!" she gasped, amazed he would ask. "Why should I? His behavior to us has been deplorable. He even tried to attack Alex in front of the King which was the real reason he was banished." Angrily, Marina told him Alex's version of the incident. "Why should I lower myself by meeting such a man? And what possible good would it do?"

"It might avert future bloodshed," he replied earnestly. "Remember, it all started with you at the Harvest Ball."

"Started with me . . . ?" Marina's eyes flashed wrathfully. "I wasn't to blame for that. *He* was!"

David sighed and his shoulders slumped. He looked the very picture of dejection at that moment, and angry as she was, Marina almost felt sorry for him. He was young and idealistic, and, she could tell, eager to end the fray. And true enough, Bothwell was in a very strong position and to continue the quarrel would not, she supposed, benefit the clan Sinclair. Oh, if Alex were only here to advise her! But he would be gone for several days; Marina sensed though he rarely discussed business with her that his search was beginning to bear fruit.

In a more normal tone she said, "I dislike the man, David, and cannot imagine what good it would do for me to meet him."

His dark eyes flared with hope, sensing that she was wavering.

"I have been invited to dine with him at his manor outside Edinburgh tomorrow evening. He would be greatly honored if you would come too." He seized both her hands and squeezed them. "Please come with me, Marina." And he added persuasively, "Think of it as doing

something for the clan."

She groaned, and even while loathing the idea, nodded. "Oh . . . very well."

Relieved, he embraced her fiercely.

Early the following afternoon they set out for Bothwell's country manor, which turned out to be much farther from Edinburgh than Marina had first believed. The April sun was warm on their backs as they rode through the city and into the countryside, now bursting with fresh greenery, early wildflowers dotting the fields and hedgerows with splashes of color. Marina was dressed in a jade-green silk gown embroidered with tiny seed pearls. Since all her gowns were fashionably low-cut the way Alex liked them and exposed more of her body than she cared to reveal to Bothwell's hot eyes, she had added a gauzy scarf delicately studded with minute brilliants, pretty and at the same time concealing. Over this she wore a mantle of the same rich jade color, but warmly lined with wool. A pert little hat sat to one side of her cascading corn-colored curls. "Ravishing!" David had praised when she was ready to leave an unfortunate choice of word, Marina thought dourly.

David was in excellent spirits and regaled her with the latest court jokes as they rode along, clearly delighted that Marina had agreed to accompany him to his friend's house, and little realizing that as they left Edinburgh behind she had a strong urge to turn back, to refuse to go with him after all. She had no desire whatsoever to dine with Lord Bothwell, to even see him again, and though she had allowed to let

herself be persuaded for the best of reasons, Alex might not see it that way, Marina fretted. What would he think of this venture of hers into diplomacy? Back and forth her mind swung, like a pendulum gone berserk.

David, however, glowed with confidence. He seemed in no doubt about the success of the meeting. He looked very smart in his blue-and-gold doublet and matching cape, the bright sunlight bringing out the chestnut glints in his hair, his skin aglow, dark eyes shining at the coup he had accomplished in bringing both sides of the feud together. Glancing at her handsome escort, Marina found herself thinking, Well, David, you certainly have persuasiveness and tenacity. In your way you are every bit as resolute as your older brother. We must hope it is in the *right* way.

He smiled at her cheerily, commenting, "What a bonny day for a trip, eh, Marina?"

She nodded. "How much longer will this trip be?" They had already been traveling for well over an hour.

"Oh . . . about thirty or forty minutes or so."

It turned out to be quite a bit further. And at some point it struck Marina that their escort David's squire, Boyd, and three Sinclair clansmen had been unusually quiet during the journey. Glancing at them, she noted that they looked sober, even a little sullen, which wasn't like them at all. Even stranger, when Boyd caught her looking at him he quickly turned his head away. "What ails them?" she queried David, nodding at the men. "They don't seem too keen about visiting Bothwell's place."

He shrugged. "It comes from listening to foolish, superstitious nonsense."

"What do you mean?" Marina felt a little trill of ice scamper down her spine and suddenly knew that

she had made a mistake in coming.

But David was waving ahead. "Here are the Hepburns!" Following the direction he indicated, Marina saw half a dozen horsemen riding hard toward them up a hill, and behind them, in a wooded valley, she glimpsed the turrets of the manor house just visible above the trees. From here it reminded her of Baxton Hall in the way it was situated.

"Welcome!" the leading rider called to them when they drew closer. "Ho, Sinclair, I like well the set of your party." Then he turned to the others behind him and, cupping a hand to his mouth, shouted back, "The lady is with him."

At that one of the others broke from the team and wheeled around and galloped back to the manor.

Alex and six well-trained men were hidden in the old church long before the last of the daylight left the sky, concealed in the gallery and belfry, six more waiting in the woods with the horses a quarter of a

mile away. Through the narrow windows they watched night encroach, birds winging through the dusk to their nests in the trees surrounding the building. The sudden screech of an owl pierced the stillness. Downhill, in the village, lights flickered on inside the houses, and the interior of the church grew dark.

Would this prove to be yet another wild goose chase? Months of investigation, of tracking several suspects, had been illuminating, if frustrating. Alex had discovered that there were several covens of witches within a fifty-mile radius of Edinburgh alone or people who thought of themselves as witches. Once he located their meeting places, in woods, in a secluded cove on the beach, even in a private house,

he had managed to observe a few of their services and rituals without being detected. They were amateurs at their craft, he had seen that at once, more enthralled by the excitement and danger of their nefarious activity, the wickedness and depravity of the ceremony, of tasting the forbidden, than anything else. These groups posed no threat to King James. Their aims had been more mundaneto cast evil spells on neighbors and employers whom they felt had wronged them, or make magic to "cure" a barren woman, a sick husband or child. They were very disorganized, frequently squabbling among themselves over some trifle, a rite not properly carried out, what should or shouldn't be included in their services. So far the King's name had never been brought up nor had the devil, their master, deigned to appear to grace their worship.

The chief suspect, Cochrane, had been the soul of propriety, quietly going about his business as a tailor, no longer prowling about in the dead of night, nor drinking his daily cup of ox blood or in any other way further incriminating himself or others.

"Methinks he kens he is being watched," Captain Turnbull had commented to Alex weeks ago. "He's a sly one, he is, cunning as Auld Nick himself. True, he's under observation but, man, we canna keep oor een on him every second o' the day! We'd need ten times the men the King has allotted to us to manage that. In the meantime he's carrying on his trade. Who's to say what he's up to whilst jouking in and oot o' a' these hooses, mayhap warning certain o' his clients to lie low?"

Cochrane's customers too had been under observation, not an easy task when many of them were scattered about in different parts of the

countryside, especially during the snowy winter months when it was near impossible to hide the tracks of the investi-

gators. And true enough, King James had been typically niggardly in stumping up enough money to procure good men. Captain Turnbull was a worthy soldier as were the men in the church with Alex now but two of those men were Sinclairs, Alex's cousins Jay and Adam! And their services would be paid for out of his own purse.

Alexander's frustration had increased over the cold winter months. Gradually he was beginning to wonder if they were chasing a myth, and the King was growing impatient at their lack of results, but no more so than Alex himself. He was anxious to complete the mission and take Marina back to the Highlands well ahead of the time when she would be confined. If this dragged on, it would be too dangerous to move her in her present condition, and he was anxious for their next child to be born at Castle Augusta. Instead of being here chasing witches, Alexander would fain have been further south chasing the almost equally elusive Edgar Stafford, desperate as he was to ascertain if Stafford was dead or alive. He wanted their next child to be born in wedlock.

Alex had been seething with impatience, thwarted in his efforts for the King, stymied at every turn in the investigation, well aware that his men, equally frustrated, were beginning to grow lax and careless when a month ago there had been an interesting development, which had brought them to the church they were in now. A man called Digby had been arrested near North Berwick and charged with the murder of a young girl, a charge he vigorously denied. The fourteen-year-old's mutilated corpse had been found in a wood, her throat slit and strange marks cut into her body. The doctor who examined her was of the opinion that it had been a ritualistic killing, the

"handiwork of demons."

Other than to deny culpability, Digby refused to give any other information and he was condemned to be hanged. When Alex heard about the arrest he hurried to the Tolbooth to question him, trying every tactic he could to loosen his tongue, sensing that the fellow a man in his thirties with a wife and six children had important information that might be of use to him. The most he would say was, "If I answer your questions and am released, then I shall be a dead man anyway." Then, with a fatalistic shrug, "Hanging will be the

quicker end."

Alex went to see his wife in the couple's little cottage outside the village. Immediately he saw that the woman was terrified, but not so frightened that she didn't defend her husband. " 'Twas not him that done it," she staunchly maintained. "We have children of our own and Henry is a soft-hearted father; he would never have harmed that girl."

"Then who is responsible?" Alex roared, losing his temper in his frustration. "Would you see your husband hang, your children left fatherless? What will become of you, woman, with no man to support your family?" Then he added craftily, almost smelling her fear, "To protect you."

She wrung her hands, whimpering. She darted to the window of her cottage and peered out, her plump frame trembling violently. Alex was almost sorry for her as he watched her. She loved her husband, that was obvious, but some dread terror rendered her mute.

He suddenly thought of a way that might loosen her tongue.

"Give me the information I seek and I promise to protect you."

She swung around from the window, stark hope in her eyes. "Sir, could you move us away from here now . . . today? 'Twould have to be far away," she made clear, "where they cannot reach me. Get me out of this place and," she swallowed, "I will tell you what you want to know, though . . . I must be honest and confess that I dinna ken all the ins and outs of it."

Alex was at the stage where he couldn't afford to overlook any thread that might lead him to his quarry, and though Mistress Digby freely admitted that she knew little, still, that little might set them on the right track. But if she were suddenly to leave the area, that alone might look suspicious and tip the real culprits off, and again they would lie low. When he discovered that her parents were dead and she had a sister living in Edinburgh, he said, "Bide here another day or two, just long enough to spread word through your neighbors that you are moving to live with your family in the city. In the meantime, I'll make arrangements for you and the children to stay elsewhere."

But until then, the terrified Mistress Digby refused to give Alex her information. "Nay, sir," she shook her head when he pressed her, "I must be gone from here first."

Again at his own expense, Alexander resettled the Digbys in Dunfermline, a town north of Edinburgh, and once ensconced in her new premises the goodwife felt secure enough to talk.

Her husband had been the herdsman for an estate called The Grange, she began, and for a few extra coppersmuch needed by the familyhad been roped into working as a lookout or sentry for a group who met to discuss politics in various locations in the North Berwick area. Before these meetings it had been Digby's duty to thoroughly search the premises

chosen to be used that evening. "Then the group would come after dark and have their meetings," she said.

She took a deep breath and burst out, "They were a' witches!"

At this Alexander's heart sank and again he tasted the bitterness of failure. Witches! The very word had become the bane of his existence. He was disgusted.

Then she said, "They were important folks, some frae Edinburgh, but they didna want Henry to see these men, so once he finished searching the premises, Mr. Cochranehe was the convenerdismissed him."

At mention of Cochrane, Alex picked up his ears and gave her his full attention.

Mistress Digby chuckled grimly. "But sometimes Henry hung about outside. He was curious, you see? That's when he found oot they were demons." The woman shuddered and hugged herself. "My man would have quit working for them, but he was sore afeared to say he wanted no part of their filthy game, frightened they would hurt him or me and the bairns. Oh, the things he heard coming oot o' them meetings! 'Twas heathenish, dreadful."

Then, she said, the meetings had suddenly stopped. Alex could understand why. Careful as Cochrane and his men had been, he must indeed have sensed he was being watched, and tipped off the others in the coven. "But they started up again in March," Mistress Digby continued, her voice shaking. "Henry knew there was something big afoot. There were more of them; he could tell they were important by the rich fur on their cloaks. Ye see, they always entered the meeting place bundled from head to toe in mantles, hoods pulled doon over their faces. They didna want to be seen, ye

ken." She sucked in her breath, adding, "Something big was underway, but I swear to you that Henry wasn't there the night they made the sacrifice to the success o' their endeavor. The . . . the lassie. My man was sick abed that eve wi' a dreadful belly distemper, so Hughie, the other sentry, took his place." She cried bitterly, "But 'twas my Henry who was blamed for killing that girl!"

By patient questioning Alexander quickly found out that Digby either didn't know the names of the "important people" attending these meetings or had thought it prudent not to divulge them to his wife. But Jane Digby was able to give Alex the three main locations where the meetings took place, a church, a barn, and a derelict house deep in the country. She also gave him another important piece of information. The other sentry, Hugh Hobart, was a young man who happened to be seriously courting a local girl, and when sent to check a meeting place he tended to go early, quickly look it over, then hurry away to see his lass in the evening. "He is no' so thorough as my Henry, but Cochrane hasn't discovered that yet or he'd knock his head off."

It proved to be a useful tip, and turned out to be true. For four weeks now Alex and his men had monitored all three locations where Cochrane and party met without success. But early that evening Jay Sinclair, who had been posted to watch the church, had come galloping back to tell them that a man fitting Hugh Hobart's description had entered the church, stayed inside not more than five minutes, then exited and mounted his mule to return to town.

Alex immediately set off for the church taking only six men with him, reasoning that the fewer there were, the less chance of discovery. As they waited in silence,

Captain Turnbull stationed near a front window looking downhill to the town, and Jay Sinclair by one at the back, facing across a field, Alex fervently hoped that they weren't destined to be disappointed once more. Hard facts and names were what he needed, rather than nebulous mumbo-jumbo. Alex was convinced that many in the town knew what was going on, but were too frightened to admit it; they *had* to know. The church they were in now was close to the village, and the nefarious activities of the "demonic pact" could not have escaped notice.

Whoever was behind it had power, Alex mused. The townspeople were thoroughly cowed, completely muzzled. Who was that person?

He was determined now to find out his identity.

Suddenly his cousin Jay hissed, "They come now across the field!"

"How many?" Alex whispered back.

" 'Tis hard to tell . . . mayhap a dozen."

Francis Stewart, the Earl of Bothwell, had spent much time in France. When he chose, the French influence was reflected in his manners. The nobleman greeted Marina and David effusively and kissed Marina's hand. He was greatly honored by this visit, he said, and delighted to be able to offer them the hospitality of his home. "I dare to hope that the rest of my company, who will join us in the evening, will meet with your approval, also the entertainment I have provided."

David clapped him on the back. "It always does, Francis. Well," he said, his eyes glinting with mischief as he glanced at the woman at his side, "here is Marina. Now, hopefully, you two can be friends."

Marina was startled and embarrassed when Both-

well suddenly dropped down on one knee, his head bowed before her. "I most humbly crave your pardon, madam, if I have unwittingly offended you," he murmured. "Please be kind enough to accept my heartfelt apology?"

"Oh . . ." she flushed, ". . . of course." Perhaps, she thought, she had misjudged the man after all.

He stood up and smiled at her, and though he wasn't a handsome man, she noticed then that he had a certain puckish charm, a smile that reminded her of Jay Sinclair.

"Now I am happy!" Bothwell announced. Draping an affectionate arm around David's broad shoulders, he went on warmly, "I would have no quarrel with the Sinclairs or anyone belonging to them." He looked Marina right in the eye, adding in sincere tones, "I truly am glad that you have forgiven me."

This Bothwell, she thought, was like a different man! And indeed he couldn't have been more gracious when he happily ushered them into his home and refreshed them with sparkling wine and dainty French pastries. The earl had the best chef in Scotland, the best pastry cook, and the wine he served was superior to that offered by the King to his

guests. And his Hall Marina gazed about her in wonder, wondering how she could ever have thought it was like Baxton Hall. The place was sumptuous, with rich velvets and priceless silken tapestries, mahogany furniture that was gilded and even set with hand-painted medallions depicting scenes from Greek mythology. There were exquisite urns and vases delicately colored and glazed and set with lapis lazuli and deep cobalt blue, and crystal that glittered in the sunlight streaming in the windows.

"Oh'tis beautiful!" Marina gasped. She had nev-

er seen anything so opulent, so rare and splendid, and doubted that the royal palace itself was remotely as grand.

Bothwell bowed. "Thank you. I enjoy having beautiful things around me and make a point of bringing something back from my travels. If you will look at this clock . . ." He motioned Marina over to a table near the mantel where the timepiece sat. It was very old, he said, and had come from Florence. Bothwell then explained something of the history of the clock, and when his guest showed an interest he took her around the huge room drawing her attention to other unusual items and their provenance. He had an extensive knowledge of antiques which Marina found fascinating.

This was Francis Stewart at his best, the sparkling, attentive host, the more sparkling if that guest happened to be a beautiful woman. Glancing at her, but taking care not to stare as he would have liked to, Francis thought that Sinclair's fair mistress was something rather unique and special herself. Her eyes! Never had he seen such entrancing eyes, so darkly, brilliantly beautiful, the kind that immediately brought those she gazed upon under their spell. His fingers itched to pluck the pins and combs from her thick, pale gold hair, and let it spill like silk through his fingers, then take her shapely form in his arms and press his mouth to her soft lips.

David smiled to himself as he watched them indulgently, well pleased at the way things were going. He could see that Marina was still a little stiff, perhaps wary, but nothing like the way she had been when he first suggested this visit. And before long, David was sure, Francis would have her eating out of his hands. Then, all going well, they would return to Clairmont,

and when Alex came home, Marina would regale him with the pleasure of this visit and what a courteous, wonderful host Bothwell

had been. He only hoped that Francis would not drink too much in the course of the evening, because he tended to become a little mischievous when under the influence, and Marina might not understand that it was mere playfulness. David also made a note to himself to drink very little. They would be returning to Edinburgh later, and it was a foolhardy fellow who traveled at night with his wits addled, prey to highwaymen and cutthroats.

Once they'd had a short rest and finished their refreshments, Bothwell led them outside to his gardens and what a sight! The flower beds were a mass of yellow daffodils and scarlet tulips, and there were hundreds of pink and white cherry trees in full bloom. Fountains gushed silver spray into the still air. Little waterfalls had been cunningly constructed to tumble down through lush greenery into glassy pools below. Lacy humpbacked bridges spanned a stream, and an ornate bandstand took pride of place in the center of the lawn.

"This is where we have musical evenings in summer," said their host. "And oftentimes in which all the guests take part."

Marina could easily imagine such lovely evenings. She was enchanted with the estate, and impressed with the excellent taste of its owner. He must be very rich indeed, she reflected, to be able to indulge his lavish taste, for on top of all she had already seen, Francis conducted them to his stables full of fine blooded horses, then to his aviary of rare and exotic birds, and his duck pond where he raised birds for the table. Everything was immaculate and perfect.

Marina laughed in delight. "Lord Bothwell," she

said, "I have never seen anything remotely like it" with a wave around "and probably never shall again."

"You are too kind," he beamed, "and please call me Francis."

There was an instant when his penetrating eyes met hers, then he quickly looked away. " 'Tis growing cooler," he said, taking her elbow. "Shall we go back indoors and partake of some hot punch? I think you will find it delicious. The spices come from the East and the wine from France"

"Delicious, I assure you," David heartily approved. "But what else would one expect in this paradise?"

The punch was delicious, the conversation amusing, and Earl Bothwell

faultless in his conduct. Today he was everything one would expect a cousin of the King to be. By the time the sun had started to sink into the west, Marina was completely disarmed and beginning to feel rather ashamed of herself for judging him too hastily. She could see now why David liked him so much.

The afternoon faded into evening and the first of the guests began to arrive, others coming fast behind them, more than David had imagined there would be, a host of Hepburns, some Mortons and Ogilvys, Sir Oliver Kerr who had once insulted the King in public and spent four years in the Tolbooth because of it and Lord White, a virulent opponent of the Lennox faction, and others, few of whom David cared for. He noticed that there were very few women among them and hoped that Marina didn't feel awkward.

Bothwell's servants sped around the large gathering serving wine, but when a servant made to refill David's glass, he put his hand over it and shook his

head, causing the fellow to gape at him in surprise, for usually David drank heartily with all the others and spent the night at the manor. This evening would be different. David knew that Marina would never consider staying here, nor would he press her. He was grateful that she had agreed to come at all.

Dinner was served, a delectable meal, thought Marina, and the talk at table was light and amusing at first; their host had a sharp wit and kept them all laughing, but as course followed course and the wine and spirits kept flowing, the conversation in spite of the fact that there were women present turned to politics. First Ludovic Stuart, the young Duke of Lennox, was lambasted, then Maitland and Robert Bruce, and finally King James himself. These men were sneered at, mocked, ridiculed. "We have a King in petticoats!" declared Sir Oliver Kerr. "How, one must wonder, can he expect to put a babe in the Queen's belly?" And slyly, "Mayhap another will put it there for him, eh, Bothwell?"

There was a burst of laughter, rough and crude, one man pounding the table with his fist, another spluttering in his wine. Marina looked at their host, expecting him to be angry or at least annoyed. Instead, he was laughing as loud as all the rest.

"Aye," he chortled, "I'm ever ready to oblige my royal relative when it comes to that kind of service. After all, we cannot have poor Queen

Anne pining and fretting because she's a bride untouched and untried."

Marina felt an inward start as she gazed at him. Bothwell's face was deeply flushed with all the spirits he had consumed, his eyes glittering, his courtly manner fast disintegrating into something coarse and lewd as he had been at Castle Augusta. David too one of the few at table still clear-eyed and

soberstared at his friend as if he had never really seen him before. He was startled when Francis announced, "Well, good people, if things go as planned we shall all be delivered from the curse of the present regime. First business, then pleasure." His hot eyes flicked to Marina. "Our friends are working hard for us this night all over the land. Services are being conducted, success guaranteed. Oswald!" he shouted to his steward. "Bring in the document."

The steward appeared with a paper and a tray of writing materials.

Francis Stewart was the first to sign, then the document was passed to the man on his right, then the woman seated next to him, all signing until it came to David Sinclair. David read what was written there, and his eyes jumped to Bothwell. "Mother of God!" he cried. "What are you about?"

A sudden hush descended on the room, all eyes turned to Sinclair.

"Sign, Davy," Bothwell purred. "You are with me, are you not, my friend?"

"Are you mad? This is treason!"

"Sign!" Bothwell bellowed. "Christ's foot, don't try my patience." He lowered his head, glaring at Sinclair from under his brows, growling, "I would not like to think you are another such as that brother of yours, for if so"

David jumped to his feet, his face pale, eyes bleak and disillusioned. "Listen to me, Francis, I beseech you as a friend, have done with this insanity. It has absolutely no hope of succeeding, nor would the people of Scotland ever accept you. Stop now before this goes any further. Tear up the document and forget it was ever drawn up." His eyes swept the others, all of whom were clearly hostile now. "Destroy this paper or

you are all doomed."

Bothwell leapt up, overturning his chair, and his dagger was in his hand. At the same time two men ran to bar the door.

"Sign," Francis Stewart repeated, his voice eerily quiet, "or you are the one who is doomed, Sinclair."

30

At the church door the witches halted, and the men hiding in the loft heard the scrape of a key in the massive lock and saw, dimly, candles flaring. Shuddering, the watchers hastily crossed themselves, several wishing that they were far away from here this night. The devil-worshippers shuffled into the building chanting in Latin, their voices guttural and low, their hooded figures casting weird moving shadows on the walls of the church they were about to desecrate.

There were thirteen of them led by a tall man in black robes who mounted the pulpit and turned to face the congregation, but before he threw back his hood he inquired, "Convener, is the building clean?"

"It is clean, master," Edward Cochrane assured him.

The tall man bent his head for a moment as if thinking or listening! though there wasn't a sound from above; Sinclair's men were well hidden.

"Look about," the leader ordered.

Cochrane knew better than to argue, though he was impatient to get on with the service, a particularly important one that night. He knew that Hughie Hobart had just returned to town from checking the premises; Hobart realized that laxity might cost him his life, therefore would have been thorough. But Cochrane dutifully hurried to the shaky wooden stairs leading up to the gallery while another man searched below. Once above, the convener paused for a few seconds, listening, sniffing the musty air like a fox after quarry. He prided himself on having superhuman instincts, and aside from that, he had made it his business to ensure that no strangers had been seen about the town that day or in the vicinity of the church itself. The people who had been watching him all during the winter months she had sensed their presence immediately! had given up weeks ago and returned to Edinburgh empty-handed for all their trouble. He was too

clever for them, but then they were not equipped with the special instincts that *he* possessed.

Nevertheless, candle in hand, Cochrane strode about the gallery thrusting out the light to see into dark corners, for it was very dark up here, little realizing, with all his sharply honed senses, that in doing so he walked directly under the massive oaken beams where several of Sinclair's team lay prone, scarcely daring to draw breath. He passed within two feet of Alex himself, who stood stock still, dagger in hand, behind the narrow door leading up to the belfry.

After a quick look around, the convener returned to the top of the stairs, paused once more to listen; then his feet went clattering down the steps.

Thereupon the service began, all throwing back

their hoods to reveal nine men and four women, several of whom Alexander, creeping forward to station himself behind a stout pillar near the balcony rail, instantly recognized, one of them an exiled Ruthven, cousin of the Ruthven who had tried to kill King James at the tender age of sixteen. But the man acting the part of Satan was unknown to Alex, a tall, hollow-cheeked fellow with a hooked nose, black beard, and dark eyes, one who obviously looked the part he had chosen to play, and who had managed to exert great power over his followers from the homage they were paying him.

A little of Alexander's hope ebbed as he watched them going through the usual rituals he had come to expect in such services—the drinking of the blood, burning sulfur, profanely desecrating the church, voices rising as they sang their praises to Lucifer, bowing and scraping to the man leading them—chilling to watch, but all much akin to devilish services that Alex had witnessed before, and his heart sank.

A sudden hush fell over them, an expectancy in the air.

"Bring forth the prisoner, James Stewart!" their master cried in a resounding voice.

Alex felt a shiver of excitement flit across his nerves.

From her basket one of the female witches took an object about a foot long. It was completely covered, and without removing the cloth the woman handed it to "Satan," who laid it on the altar and removed the wrappings. Then seizing it to Alex it looked like a wax doll—he

triumphantly thrust it high in the air, shouting, "This is King James VI, ordained to die by me at the instigation of Francis, Earl Bothwell!"

"Die!" they all chanted. "Die!" as the effigy of the

King was passed to each worshiper in turn, touched to the candles they were holding, the wax dripping so that by the time it reached the thirteenth person there was nothing left of the tiny figure of the King.

Finally, at long last, Alexander had the name of the man behind it all.

Sheriff Roy Napier stood in the hall at Broken-bridge Farm, hat respectfully in hand as he relayed his grim news to the Porters. Both Bert and Gwen were silent when he finished, each digesting it in their own way. Gwen was the first to speak. "Sheriff, are you certain there is no mistake?"

"Very certain," he nodded. "We have Fordyce and three of the others in custody now. They confessed under torture. Fordyce gave us very detailed directions to the gravesite in Scotland, and after seeking permission from the Scottish authorities, we went to the site and exhumed the remains. I knew Edgar Stafford and 'twas him all right. He was still wearing his old tunic with his badge, though everything else of value had been stripped from his body." His lip curled slightly. "The tunic was ancient; clearly the culprits had considered it to be worthless."

The sheriff went on to say that Stafford's widow would have to be informed, and since they were close neighbors, he wondered if they knew where she could be reached. He had learned from the dead man's lawyer that there was a considerable sum of money left behind. "Folks are strange, are they not?" he said ruefully. "Stafford was rich, but he lived like a pauper. Well, at least his widow will benefit from it."

Gwen knew that Marina would have no interest in Edgar's money. It was her freedom that was beyond price to her. She gave Sheriff Napier her friend's

address in the Highlands, but the moment he left, sat down herself and wrote a letter to Marina and sent it off by express courier.

"Oh," she said dreamily to her husband, "what I would give to see Marina's face when she receives that letter."

"Sign!" Bothwell screamed when David made no move to obey him. "I ask you for the last time."

"Never!" Sinclair shouted back. "Youyou traitor! And to think I held you in high esteem."

David leaped clear of the table and turned his back to the wall, his sword in his hand as the other men closed in around him. All the female guests scurried out of the room rather than watch a bloody killing, but Marina, her heart pounding in terror, glanced about frantically seeking some way she might help Alex's brother, who seemed certain to die within seconds, vastly outnumbered as he was. The sudden shattering clash of steel meeting steel, the howling of the traitors baying for blood, exploded in the room, deafening her. With a horrified glance at David completely surrounded now, fighting desperately for his life, Marina seized two heavy crystal decanters of brandy and splashed the contents of one over the tablecloth,

the other on the curtains, then hurled the candles against them, setting them alight.

As flames flickered and sped snakelike across the table and burst into a ball of orange fire on the taffeta drapes, Marina plucked a carving knife off the board and concealed it in the folds of her gown, then threw herself behind a Chinese screen opposite the door. The would-be assassins wheeled around with cries of surprise and alarm, their eyes glittering in the red glow that now filled the chamber, the fire spreading rapidly as pieces of curtain and tablecover dropped off and fell on the beautiful Turkey carpet that Bothwell had been so proud of, but one that burned as swiftly as any other.

In seconds the chamber began to reek with smoke, the men to cough and splutter, eyes streaming. Afraid of being roasted alive in a room filled with fine lace, silk, heavy velvet, and lovelythough highly combustiblewainscotting, the men made a wild stampede for the door, pushing and shoving each other out of the way in their panic, leaving only Bothwell behind with Sinclair. Choking, panting for breath, Francis Stewart thrust blindly with his dirk and caught David on the upper arm, then he too flew for the door to escape while he could. Once there, he slammed and locked it behind himand David and Marina were trapped in the burning chamber.

David raced to the tall window and slashed down what remained of the drapes with his sword. Grabbing a heavy silver candlestick from the table, he hammered out the glazing. Thinking that Marina had run from the room with the other women when the fighting started and wondering how to reach her, he jumped violently when someone caught his arm. "Marina!" he gasped, astounded at the sight of her. "How . . ."

But she put a finger over her mouth and pointed at the window. By now her head was reeling and lungs bursting from inhaling the smoke, and she was certain that if they tarried a moment longer both of them would be overcome. She knew she had taken a mad chance in setting fire to the room, but it was the only way she had been able to think of to save David's life. Now they must get out while they could or Bothwell would get his wish after all.

David went first, the skin of his arms and face raked by jagged glass slivers still clinging to the panes, and once outside he turned around and lifted Marina over the sill. Both staggered to the nearest bushes and fell headlong onto the grass, coughing, sucking in great gulps of the cool night air, sweeter to them than the costliest perfume at that moment. As soon as their heads cleared they got up. David took her hand and they raced for the woods and kept going until they were well away from the estate, finally forced to pause for a rest on a rise of ground near an old road leading to the town of Haddington. When they looked back they could see flames shooting above the trees, and even from here could smell the smoke wafting to them on the breeze.

For a moment both were mute, then David said shakily, "I cannot believe it. How could I have been so wrong?"

Marina squeezed his hand; he sounded devastated, crushingly disappointed. It was a second before she felt the trickling wetness running down his arm, dripping on her hand. "You are bleeding! David"

" 'Tis nothing." He shrugged, far more upset at his poor judgment of character, hating himself too for having exposed Marina to such danger. But she ripped off a strip of material from the hem of her gown, helped him ease off his jacket, and bound the wound

as best she could. When she straightened up, David suddenly threw his arms around her and embraced her. "Forgive me," he said. "Oh, Marina, how sorry I am about this . . ."

"Hush, sweeting." She stroked his hair, understanding how betrayed he must be feeling, how sad to discover that a man he had admired and defended a man he had idolized had turned out to have feet of clay. It was a bitter moment for David, but a grim lesson Marina was sure he would not soon forget.

Suddenly he raised his head. "Listen!"

They heard the dull thundering of hoofbeats coming down the hill, Alex and his men on their way to arrest Bothwell and his fellow-conspirators. When they reached the burning mansion they found the place in chaos, many lying about in the grounds outside overcome with smoke inhalation, others futilely trying to put out the fires that had spread to other rooms. The noise the roaring of the flames, the shouting, the crashing of roof timbers helped muffle the sound of the approach of the King's men. There had been twenty guests at the house that night and Alex only had a dozen men with him now, but *his* group had the advantage of surprise; they were also well trained and far more clear-headed.

The battle with those outside the house was brief and they were quickly bound together with chains. Bothwell himself had been flying in and out of the manor desperate to save as many of his valuable possessions as possible, never realizing that the most valuable of all his freedom and perhaps even his life was at stake. When he ran out of the house carrying a priceless T'ang vase in his arms and saw the tall, resolute figure of Alexander Sinclair standing on the threshold his sword in his hand he was so startled and dismayed that he dropped the vase.

Horried, he instinctively glanced down when it burst into dozens of pieces on the step, and in that moment Alex sprang forward and touched the point of his rapier to his throat.

"Lord Bothwell," he said, "I arrest you in the name of the King."

The highest in the land came to Holyrood Palace to see King James honor Alexander Sinclair and invest him with his new title of Earl of Dalraida. With the title came three castles and thousands of acres of land, and the revenue from that land, rivers and lochs and deer forests, villages and towns.

At the glittering occasion was Sinclair's wife, the new countess, Marina, his proud family, friends, and important members of his clan. The couple's two children, Clare and newborn Quinton, were too

young to attend the ceremony. The countess had only two guests, Gwen and Bert Porter from England, Gwen quite overcome with tears of joy and delight when she watched Alexander receiving his earldom. "From the start I knew he was special," she whispered to her husband. "From the very start! I knew," she dabbed at her streaming eyes, "that he was destined for great things."

"To be sure," her husband murmured, patting her knee indulgently, remembering once the whole story of her complicity in the affair came out Gwen telling him that Alexander Sinclair looked like a pirate. But that was beside the point now and didn't seem important.

Marina, her own eyes sparkling with tears, looked from Alexander to his parents. What a moment for them too! she thought, Blake beaming with pride, Alyssa clutching his hand, smiling even while fighting back emotion that she could hardly contain, both of

them so relieved to have their two older sons of equal rank at last, David and the rest of their children sharing their jubilation.

A sumptuous banquet followed the ceremony. Alexander, the new earl, sat at the right hand of the King, and Marina, his countess, on his left, stunning in rose-pink brocade. Feeling that she was living a dream, Marina glanced down at the lower tables ranged below them at all the powerful people sitting there, dazzling in their finery, jewels flashing in the candlelight. All here today to see her husband honored, aware that he was a man who had forged his own way and mapped out his own path to glory, his triumph all the sweeter for having accomplished it himself.

King James, who had a poetic turn of mind, glanced from Alexander to Marina. "The flower and flame of Scotland," he said. "Long may the one bloom, and the other burn."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Marina murmured.

As the meal progressed, the King asked her many questions about life in England. When she told him that her maiden name had been Dudley, he inquired, "Can you be related to the Dudley who was the Earl of Leicester, once the great favorite of my cousin, Queen Elizabeth?"

Marina hesitated, then shook her head. "I think not . . ."

"But you are not sure?"

" 'Tis possible, I suppose, that there might be some distant connection."

The young King loved mysteries and the English beauty intrigued him. He had discovered that her background was somewhat obscure, though certain tantalizing rumors had come to his ears through his secret correspondence with Robert Devereux, the Earl

of Essex, who had been the stepson of the Dudley in question.

"It might be possible to find out," suggested the King, gazing into Marina's brilliant dark eyes.

"Perhaps . . ."

Marina had no desire whatsoever to rake up the past. Deep down in her mind lurked a hazy impression from her very early childhood from before Maud Percy took her to Chiltern Castle that, though shadowy, always filled her with disquietude when she thought about it. Nay, she decided while the King watched her with interest, the past was better left alone. Her life was in Scotland now, and a wonderfully happy life it was. She was perfectly content with the way things were and some instinct warned her to leave it that way.

Dancing followed the feast, and Marina and Alexander, as guests of honor, opened the ball. When his arms went around her, Marina looked up into his face, all the pride, the love she felt for him shining in her eyes. "What a day this has been, my lord," she said smiling. "Not only the people here, but the whole country rejoicing in your triumph."

"Aye." He grinned, his eyes moving over her face adoringly. "But now what? Where do we go from here?" he teased.

"It matters not, my love, as long as we go together."

Alexander drew her close and kissed her in front of the entire assembly.

EPILOGUE

Late in the autumn of that year, 1592, a small package was delivered to Castle Augusta addressed to Marina. The courier left it with the steward and rode away. Later, when it was sent on to Marina at Dalraid Castle, she opened it to find a gold ring inside, a man's ring

with the letter D picked out in tiny rubies on the face of it. Written on the small card enclosed with the ring was the cryptic message: "From one who loves you."

The identity of the sender was destined to remain a mystery.